QUINNEY'S ADVENTURES

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

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QUINNEY'S ADVENTURES

By HORACE A. VACHELL

BROTHERS
THE HILL
QUINNEYS'
THE FOURTH DIMENSION
FISHPINGLE
LOOT
JOHN VERNEY
THE TRIUMPH OF TIM
THE WATERS OF JORDAN
THE PALADIN
BLINDS DOWN
SPRAGGE'S CANYON
SOME HAPPENINGS
JOHN CHARITY
THE PINCH OF PROSPERITY
THE SHADOWY THIRD
BUNCH GRASS

QUINNEY'S ADVENTURES

BY HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

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To
MY OLD FRIEND
HERBERT JOHNSON

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The Barbens of Barben-Lacy

I

JOE QUINNEY was in a bad temper.

Everybody in the Soho Square establishment, including Susan, his wife, was aware of this. Two things had happened to upset him. He had been outbid at Christie's by a rival dealer for the possession of a magnificent figure of the goddess of Mercy, Kuan-Yin, which he greatly coveted. And then, returning to his sanctuary and heartening himself up —as was his wont—by caressing gently a beautiful *famille noire* bowl, the beloved object had slipped, somehow, through his fingers, and shattered itself upon the parquet floor. Once before, when he was a boy, such a disaster had happened, and—to impress the accident upon a plastic memory—his father had dusted the boy's jacket handsomely with a rattan cane. Young Joe, like Poe's Raven, had muttered to himself: "Never more!"

He picked up the bits of the bowl and put them away in a drawer. Everything is possible to the cunning restorer of broken porcelain, as the Portland Vase bears witness, but Joe Quinney knew well enough that a thing of surpassing beauty would degenerate, after treatment, into what he detested

—a cripple! He couldn't caress cripples in porcelain.

Alone in his sanctuary he meditated mournfully upon the loss of the goddess of Mercy and the *famille noire* bowl. Susan, he was aware, would not sympathize with him wholeheartedly. For twenty years she had been jealous of the loving attention paid to the bowl. Once or twice she had secretly contemplated its destruction.

Ravaged by his emotions, Quinney remained alone in his sanctuary undisturbed by the staff. But, presently, his features relaxed as he bent over a small show-case which held some miniatures. For many years Quinney had refused to buy miniatures, for the sufficing reason that he knew little about them. But sooner or later anything of real beauty was bound to appeal to him, and gradually expert knowledge had come to him. Now, he confessed to Susan that he preferred them to pictures.

He was gloating over a Petitot, when an assistant presented himself.

"A lady to see you, sir."

"What about?" growled Quinney.

"She asked to see you, sir."

"I dessay," replied Joe, who relapsed into the Doric of his youth, when he was not at his best, "but, by gum, you know well enough, my lad, that I don't see ladies just because they ask to see me. Time is money in these days. You hop it!"

The assistant moved to the door and paused.

"She's a nice lady in mourning, sir."

Quinney's attention was challenged.

"In mourning—ho? So am I. Well, I'll see her,

although I don't suppose you know the difference between a buyer and a 'rather nicer.'"

"Rather nicers" was a term of contempt stigmatizing ladies who pottered about sale rooms applying substantive and adverb to "gems," which they had no intention of purchasing.

"She don't look a 'rather nicer,'" said the assistant.

"I'll see the lady here."

The lady was ushered into the sanctuary. Quinney had to admit that her appearance was prepossessing. He could acclaim quality even when his liver was out of order. The stranger bore herself with distinction; her voice had alluring inflections; her hands and feet were delicately fashioned.

"What can I do for you, madam?"

"You are Mr. Quinney, aren't you?"

"I'm Joe Quinney right enough."

"I am Mrs. Barben, of Barben Lacy, near Symington. Are you coming to our sale, Mr. Quinney?"

Quinney shook his head.

"I haven't heard of your sale, madam."

She took from her bag a catalogue, and handed it to him in silence. Quinney glanced at the title-page, gleaning instantly the information that an early Tudor house, and what it held, was to be offered for sale at an early date.

"I ought to have had one o' these," he murmured.

He stared at the visitor, slightly raising his brows. His eyes became alert.

"I'm surprised you didn't."

"Well, madam, I ain't."

"Indeed?"

Quinney rapped the catalogue with impatient fingers, as he said tartly:

"The agents you have employed, madam, don't send catalogues to me and men like me."

The lady smiled faintly.

"Are there many men like you, Mr. Quinney?"

"Mighty few," replied Quinney with energy. "If you will kindly take a chair, madam, I should like to have a squint at this catalogue."

The lady sighed.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Quinney, that so famous a dealer will find little to interest him."

"Then why have you come here?" he asked bluntly.

But the words were void of offence, and he had offered her the best chair in the room. She sat down and answered his question with entire frankness.

"There are a few good pieces and some miniatures. I brought one miniature with me, but I know nothing about it."

She took from her bag a miniature and handed it to him.

"Ozias Humphrey," he exclaimed sharply.

"Oh, no, Mr. Quinney. That is John Barben, the great-grandfather of my husband."

"I mean, madam, that Ozias Humphrey painted it."

"Did he? I've never heard of him."

Quinney looked cross. Unconsciously this charming woman had touched a sore spot. It irritated him to find persons in possession of beautiful objects and knowing nothing whatever about them.

"But you ought to know," he snapped at her.

She shrugged a pair of slender shoulders.

"We are interested in our miniatures," she said quietly, "because they are our own people." Then she continued hurriedly: "My husband's father, Colonel Barben, and his father before him, sold the more valuable pictures and furniture, and most of the land. The old house is left. Now that must go."

Quinney's eyes softened. He said in a milder tone:

"You brought this miniature to me thinking, perhaps, that I would offer you a fair price for it."

"Oh, no. Our agents asked us to put everything into the sale. They pointed out quite reasonably, so we thought, that the very few good things left to us would attract the dealers."

"Um!" said Quinney grimly. "I quite understand, madam."

"But now—I don't."

"That is very sharp of you."

She laughed lightly.

"We have our intuitions, Mr. Quinney. Somehow I can't explain why, you have made me suspicious—not of you," she hastened to add.

Quinney said nothing for a minute or two. He glanced at the catalogue, turning over the pages with nervous fingers.

"There isn't much," he said pensively, "and the little there is don't tell much. Look at this item: 'A small collection of family miniatures.' That might mean anything or nothing to a London dealer. But I'm sure o' this, Mrs. Barben, the man who made

out this catalogue knows an Ozias Humphrey miniature when he sees it."

"You mean——?"

"I mean, ma'am, that you're up against a knock out."

"A knock out?"

Quinney explained volubly.

"There's a queer sort of honour amongst thieves, but I ain't a thief. Mind you, I buy my stuff as cheap as I can. It ain't my business to tell sellers in the open market what their stuff is worth. The sellers ought to know values, but most of 'em don't. If they did, half the dealers in our business would put up their shutters. You ought to know that this miniature is worth forty pounds and the name of the man who painted it, but you don't. At your sale it may bring a couple o' pounds, but at the 'knock out' afterwards the dealers will bid it up amongst 'emselves —see?"

"Not yet."

Quinney chuckled as he made his meaning clear. Dealers of the less reputable sort did not bid against each other at public sales for the possession of valuable objects. In a cosy room at some neighbouring tavern the precious objects cheaply bought in by the fraternity were 'put up' for a second time. Quinney concluded on a personal note:

"I've attended knock outs, madam, and I've been knocked out. I don't do business that way now, and that is why I wasn't sent this catalogue."

His visitor gasped.

"I should like to look over what is in your house, Mrs. Barben, and I should like to do it on the quiet."

"I return to Barben Lacy this afternoon, Mr. Quinney. You have only to name a day convenient to you."

He named the morrow, and Mrs. Barben smiled, thanked him, and went her way.

II

After reaching Westhampton, Quinney did not go on to Symington by rail. Instead, he engaged a motor. The man who drove the car supposed that his fare was afraid of catching cold because he sat muffled up to the eyes as he sped through the ancient town of Symington. Quinney removed his muffler as soon as he reached Barben Lacy.

It was a delightfully attractive old manor house standing upon high ground with The Solent in front of it and the Forest of Ys behind it. Between the house and the sea stretched water-meadows and marshes with an estuary winding through them. Some excellent farming land lay high above the water-meadows. It struck Quinney immediately that here was a compact domain not likely to tax too heavily the resources of the owner. The house was not too big and the garden encircling it of modest dimensions. A family, so he decided, might live quietly in such a place for many centuries. He felt unhappy at the thought of Barben Lacy being sold.

A parlourmaid opened the front door, and she looked as if she might combine in a stout personality the more arduous duties of a housemaid. Quinney perceived that the old house was in sad need of restoration within and without.

Mrs. Barben received him in an oak-panelled parlour full of furniture of different periods, most of it worthless in the eye of a collector.

"The Barbens have been here," said the châtelaine, "for five hundred years."

"May I see the miniatures first, ma'am?"

A modest collection was submitted to critical eyes. Quinney perceived a Samuel Cooper, some Cosways, several Englehearts, a Plimer and three enamels by Zincke. All were in admirable condition.

"We keep them in a drawer, Mr. Quinney."

"It's a wicked shame to expose miniatures to the light," observed Quinney. Then he added curtly: "What you have here, ma'am, is worth about five hundred pounds to a dealer. At Christie's—if the right people were bidding—they might fetch more. They would be worth in the neighbourhood of what I say to me."

"I had no idea they were so valuable."

"Now, ma'am, I'll step through the house. We might take a look at the pictures first."

They did so. Quinney learned that every picture of value had been sold long ago. And the eighteenth century furniture, together with some earlier bits, had vanished likewise. Here and there, he discovered a chair and a bureau which had been overlooked. But, practically speaking, with the exception of the miniatures, there was hardly anything in the old house to lure a famous dealer from London to Symington.

Mrs. Barben insisted charmingly that he should lunch with her and her husband.

Major Barben came in. Quinney liked him at sight,

and liking warmed into sympathetic interest within half an hour. The Major had survived the retreat from Mons and four years in France. It struck Quinney that the young man—he looked about twenty-eight—was singularly frank and outspoken about his affairs. Colonel Barben had just died. The small estate was encumbered by a mortgage.

"We have to sell, Mr. Quinney, and that's all there is about it."

"Seems a shame," said Quinney. "After five hundred years, by gum!"

The Major nodded, adding curtly: "The portrait of the Barben who was the curse of the family hangs opposite to you. I sit with my back to him on principle."

Quinney stared at an ancient canvas badly stretched and dark with the dirt of centuries. Major Barben went on, acrimoniously:

"We had a great man in our family, Sir David Barben, who was in high favour with Henry VIII. But he left everything he could away from his grandson and heir, Richard Barben, because he knew him to be a wrong 'un. Oddly enough this spendthrift and gambler became a bit of a pincher after he succeeded, but his bad qualities popped out again in his descendants. My great-grandfather spent everything he could lay his hands on. And he was a smuggler."

"Smuggler?" repeated Quinney.

"I'll show you something presently, which will interest you."

"And so will I," murmured Mrs. Barben.

"Are you a father, Mr. Quinney?" asked the Major.

"One daughter," said Quinney.

"Ah! My wife wants to show you a son."

Quinney was more and more pleased with this agreeable couple, but it remained plain to him that the approaching sale of their ancient house affected them grievously. The two men were left together in the dining-room to drink coffee and smoke a cigar.

"The boy will be brought in," said Major Barben.

He was.

Quinney pronounced him emphatically to be a fine, fat baby boy, old enough to grip tightly an extended forefinger.

"He holds on to it," said Quinney. "I should have liked to have a little son, but," he added solemnly, "the birth o' my daughter nearly did me in. What I suffered with my first an' last tongue can't tell, leastways not mine."

Mrs. Barben laughed and carried out the baby.

In a few more minutes Quinney—always avid for information—gathered some interesting details. The house had to go, but the Major would remain upon a small farm, all that was left of a big property, and fortunately unencumbered.

"What would it take to save the house?" asked Quinney.

The Major looked slightly astonished, but Quinney's honest face disarmed him.

"Five thousand," he answered curtly. Having no appetite, probably, for indiscreet questions, the young man rose from the table and led the way into a sitting-room. Quinney noticed at once the immense thickness of the walls.

"This is the oldest part of the house," explained his host. "Examine that alcove, please."

Quinney did so, noticing that it was framed. The frame interested him immediately.

"That's a rare old frame," he remarked.

Within the frame was the alcove lined with dusky red rep. Upon some shelves stood some porcelain of no particular value.

"Under that rep," said Major Barben, "is a door leading to a cellar. In that cellar was kept the smuggled brandy and many a haunch of the King's venison. My grandfather affirmed that the frame held a picture, which, of course, concealed the alcove."

As he spoke he touched a hidden spring and the frame swung back.

"Very dodgy," observed Quinney.

"The picture that was in the frame must have been sold long ago."

"I wonder," said Quinney thoughtfully. After a pause he added tentatively: "That picture in the dining-room of—of the wrong 'un would just about fit that frame."

"You are mistaken. It's larger."

Quinney stared at an open fireplace.

"Does that chimney smoke?" he asked.

Barben laughed.

"It did—horribly, till my father found some patent chimney pot. But why do you ask?"

"The picture in the dining-room is black with smoke. I know enough to be sure of that."

"You may be right, Mr. Quinney."

Quinney produced a foot rule.

"For the fun of the thing I'd like to measure that frame."

"Certainly."

Quinney did so. Together the men returned to the dining-room. Triumphantly, Quinney demonstrated that he was right. The picture might have gone into the frame round the alcove. He examined it with quickened interest and attention.

"It's a bad portrait," said Barben. But Quinney remained silent, staring not at the face of the "wrong 'un" but at the broad chest beneath it.

"It *is* bad and it isn't," he said at last.

"What can you mean?"

"I wish I had some Castille soap and a small sponge."

"We are still able to supply that. But——"

"The face is dud work," said Quinney, "and one can't see much else, but the hands are a bit of all right."

"You have sharp eyes to see them. Are you serious? Shall I get some soft soap and hot water?"

"Lu' warm, please," amended Quinney.

"You shall have both in a jiffy."

Major Barben left the room. Quinney mounted a chair. He peered long and hard not at the hands but at what appeared to be the collar of some order and the ruff above it. Then he whistled softly, and descended from the chair.

Barben came back. Quinney made a lather, dipped a small sponge into it, and ascended the chair.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Major.

After ten minutes of gentle rubbing, part of the collar was revealed.

"No duffer painted that," said Quinney.

"What conclusion do you come to?" asked Barben.

"None as yet, Major. It's fairly obvious though

that one man painted the face and another the collar."

"Yes, it is."

"I'd like to carry that picture back to London with me, and take some of the dirt off it."

The young man hesitated and flushed slightly.

"I—I can't afford to spend money on cleaning inferior pictures."

"But that will be my affair. I can slip the picture out of its frame, remove the stretcher, and roll it up."

Major Barben nodded, impressed by Quinney's manner.

"It won't fetch less at the sale after I've been at it," he went on. "And I may bid for it myself. I shall bid for the miniatures, unless you care to dispose of them by private treaty."

"I'm afraid now I couldn't do that. I can sell the house and everything in it before the sale, but we have had no nibbles even. People aren't buying houses without modern improvements and out of repair."

"I suppose not," said Quinney. "Well—what about this picture?"

"You can do what you like with the old scoundrel. I shall be glad to be rid of him, but he must appear at the sale."

"He'll be there all right," said Quinney cheerfully.

III

Quinney returned to London and his wife. But of the picture he said not a word to the faithful Susan. He mentioned casually the miniatures.

" A nice little lot, Susie. And I'll see to it that they're bid up, my girl. A less honest man than your Joe might ha' got 'em cheap."

Susan tossed her head.

" When you go on about your honesty, Joe, I get scared. I do indeed."

Quinney grunted and grinned.

Next morning he went to work upon the dingy canvas. And he whistled as he worked. When the collar was plainly revealed, he chuckled.

" I've seen you before," he muttered.

He locked up the canvas and betook himself to the National Gallery where he spent a profitable half-hour. Thence he hurried, still whistling, to the British Museum. Quinney boasted, not without reason, that he knew where to find expert authority upon any subject or object connected with his beguiling profession. He went straight to the reading room.

Within ten minutes the knowledge he sought had become his. There had been a David Barben high in favour with Henry VIII, a notable personage. English history, however, made mention of no other Barbens. Sir David Barben had been Knight of his Shire and a Privy Councillor. Full particulars concerning him were dug out of a county history.

" Why," said Quinney to himself, " is the wrong 'un wearing an order that belonged to the right 'un ? "

Vanity, of course, might account for this, but vanity failed to account for the fact that the bejewelled collar had been painted by a master hand.

Before night the riddle was solved. Under the scowling face of the " wrong 'un " lay another face.

Quinney removed enough paint from the hair to reveal hair of a different colour beneath. We present the conjecture of a shrewd man for what it may be worth. The " wrong 'un " had hated the great man of the family, who had refused to leave a hard-earned fortune to a wastrel. The mere sight of a noble face, calmly benignant, must have exasperated the ne'er-do-well unendurably. Quinney came to the inevitable conclusion that Richard Barben had instructed some local painter to cover the face of David Barben with that of his grandson.

To remove one surface of paint from another surface beneath it is a long and delicate process, but not beyond the powers of a dealer as experienced in such matters as Joe Quinney. However, he did not attempt the task. Instead, he covered up with dirt the tiny bit of reddish hair which he had exposed.

Upon the morrow he went back to the British Museum and spent some time in the print room. His patience and acuteness were rewarded. He found a wood-engraving of Sir David Barben, Knight, after a picture by Hans Holbein, and the hands of Sir David were unmistakably the hands in the portrait. Sir David wore the same jewelled collar!

After this enlightening experience Quinney passed a restless night. The tremendous discovery was his alone. An authentic portrait by Holbein might fetch anything between five and ten thousand pounds, particularly in America. It would be easy to sell such a picture to half a dozen men of his acquaintance.

He had two unsophisticated people to deal with. Already they were under obligations to him because he had placed a fair value on the miniatures. He

could return the portrait of Richard Barben, much improved by cleaning. He could attend the sale, buy the miniatures and the family pictures which were not even specified in the catalogue. The lot would go for less than a hundred pounds. More, as a sop to his conscience, he would bid up the other good bits, take a malicious pleasure in doing so, all to the advantage of Major and Mrs. Barben. It must be remembered that he had suffered grievously in his salad days at the hands of other dealers. He had been "had" to the tune of many hundreds of pounds. Now—he would get a bit of his own back.

He fell asleep, to awake unrefreshed and unrepentant.

Early matutinal inspection of the portrait fortified the conviction that nobody—apart from the few experts who were not likely to attend a small country sale—would suspect the truth. He had not removed all the smoke and engrained dirt from the canvas. It still looked what it appeared to be superficially —a bad portrait of a singularly unprepossessing man.

"It's a sitter," thought Quinney, as he sat opposite to his Susan at breakfast.

"You didn't sleep well, Joe."

"No, I didn't. And what of it?"

"Nothing, dear, but it reminded me of that awful time when Mr. Hunsaker bought the chairs which weren't Chippendale. You talked in your sleep then; yes, you did."

"Ho! Talked in my sleep last night, did I?"

"You were tossing about and muttering."

"May be, Susie, I was dreaming of them as downed

me to rights when we first came to London town."

He finished his bacon in frowning silence and returned to the portrait. The uneasy Susan followed him, and discovered her masterful lord staring moodily at it.

"Heavens! What a face!" she exclaimed.

"He was a wrong 'un, if you want to know," admitted Quinney.

"And it's written on his face, Joe. It always does come out, don't it?"

"What comes out?"

"Wickedness, to be sure."

"Um!" grunted Quinney.

Susan went back to her household duties. Quinney rolled up the canvas. The sale was advertised to take place in a week's time. He made up his mind to carry the portrait to Barben Lacy, stretch it, place it in its frame, and look carefully over the miniatures and the other good bits.

"I'll let those Symington dealers have a squint at me," he thought, "and then the dirty dogs will know what they're up against."

Engrossed by these thoughts he caught sight of himself in a Chippendale mirror.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "It does come out, don't it?"

IV

He was received at Barben Lacy as an honoured guest. Nevertheless when he unrolled the portrait of Richard Barben, the Major exhibited annoyance rather than gratitude.

"The fellow looks a regular devil," he said shortly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Barben. "I really shouldn't like Baby to look at him."

Quinney, in reply, demanded a hammer and some tacks.

"Let him go into the sale as he is," said the Major testily.

"Dear! Dear!" said Quinney. "In his frame he'll fetch an extra fiver."

"Nobody will buy him," affirmed Mrs. Barben. Then, unable to interpret the odd expression upon Quinney's face, she said quickly: "Do you like it?"

"It's better than I thought it was," admitted Quinney.

Wife looked at husband.

"If you like it," said Major Barben, "will you accept it from us. There is nothing to prevent our giving away an ugly picture, and we are deeply grateful to you for telling us about the miniatures."

"You are very kind," said Quinney, in a hoarse voice. He was telling himself that the thing had become too easy. He could tuck the portrait under his arm and return to London. Then he heard himself saying in an odd voice:

"I do value that picture."

"It's a singularly evil face," said Major Barben. "Since you have cleaned it I seem to see in it a curious malevolence, as if he foresaw the activities of my smuggling forbears. It's odd that he should have hung in that frame to hide the opening of the alcove. He was a robber of the poor and helpless."

"Was he?" murmured Quinney.

"And that, surely, is utterly despicable. Your

bold buccaneer appeals to me. The men who sailed the Spanish Main earned their loot, but this wretched ancestor of mine oppressed his innocent tenantry. Away with him! He's yours, Mr. Quinney. We are delighted to be quit of him."

Quinney nodded his head. After a pause he said slowly:

"Look at the face, and then at the hands."

The Major did so.

"It's difficult to believe that such hands belonged to that face, Mr. Quinney. But you said they were painted by somebody else."

"Yes, I did and do."

"But how do you really know?"

"Well, for one thing, now that the picture is cleaner, we can see the brush work. I should have said that the man who painted those hands and that collar was left-handed."

"You are an expert."

Mrs. Barben said playfully:

"Don't you think we might look at somebody else. If you will come into the garden, Mr. Quinney, I'll show you Boy. He would like to squeeze your finger again."

Quinney followed the mother and father of "Boy" on to the lawn. Below them, not a mile away, lay The Solent.

"The smugglers," said Barben, "crept up that estuary. The wild fowlers, who are still my tenants, will practise the old trade again if they get the chance."

But Quinney was looking at the baby.

"It sort o' worries me," he said abruptly, "to think

that such a fine boy won't be a Barben of Barben Lacy."

Mrs. Barben turned her graceful head aside. Quinney heard a stifled sob, as the Major said frozenly:

"You will excuse me, Mr. Quinney, from discussing that."

"No, I won't," exclaimed Quinney.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's got to be discussed here and now. I want that picture, Major, but you can't afford to give it to me, because of this boy."

Husband and wife admitted afterwards that they thought their visitor was mad. For the moment they dissembled.

"Can't afford to give it to you?"

"No. Suppose I offered you five thousand for it?"

"Five thousand—what?"

"Pounds," shouted Quinney. His eyes were sparkling furiously, and his queer face was twitching with excitement. Before the astounded Barbens could utter a syllable he went on:

"But you mustn't take any offer. This is an authentic Holbein. He painted with his left hand ——! It may fetch double as much at Christie's. I'll attend to that for you."

And then he explained everything.

* * * * *

The portrait of Sir David Barben, Knight, hangs to-day in the gallery of a New York multi-millionaire. The Barbens are still at Barben Lacy.

The Paul Lamerie Cup

I

QUINNEY gazed lovingly at a silver-gilt cup which stood upon his desk. The marks were almost obliterated but not quite. With the aid of a pocket lens he could make out a "C," and the leopard's head *erased*, and the figure of Britannia. These were enough to date the cup exactly. It had been made in 1718. Of far deeper interest was the maker's mark.

"It's a Paul Lamerie right enough," muttered the dealer.

And no vandal of a later period had touched it.

Quinney's lips watered at sight of it. This, in his opinion, was a "gem" of "purest ray serene." The cup had two handles and a top. The dealer ran his fingers over the sharp edges of the acanthus leaves upon the handles.

"What a craftsman," he thought.

Nevertheless he frowned as he gloated over it.

Queer objects are brought to famous dealers by queer people and at queer times. Some of the dealers ask questions; some don't. But, in the trade generally, it is admitted, not without reluctance, that questions ought to be asked and answered satis-

factorily. Upon the previous evening a Frenchman had drifted into the Soho Square establishment, carrying a box. He had shown the cup to Quinney and, amazing fact, had left it with him. This might be a tribute to Quinney's reputation or merely a carefully considered ruse to establish confidence. But the Frenchman, who spoke English perfectly, had given another reason.

"I am staying at a hotel, Mr. Quinney. You have a safe. The cup will be more secure in your custody."

"Is it yours?" asked Quinney.

"Yes—it is mine. Your name was mentioned to me as a dealer to be trusted. I thought you might like to buy the cup or to sell it for me on commission."

The owner of the cup spoke with suave indifference.

Quinney was slightly puzzled. Occasionally he bought and sold valuable plate, but he dealt as a rule in furniture and porcelain, not disdaining, however, miniatures and pictures. He said curtly:

"Why didn't you go to one of the big silversmiths?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"But I don't know your big silversmiths. A friend of mine gave me your name. *Voila!*"

As he spoke he laid a thin card upon the desk.

"Your card?" asked Quinney.

The Frenchman smiled.

"Perfectly; it is mine."

"If you leave the cup with me, you will want a receipt, eh?"

"That is quite unnecessary. I will do myself the pleasure of calling again to-morrow, at eleven. By

that time, monsieur, you will, perhaps, have satisfied yourself in regard to the value of the cup."

Smilingly, he withdrew.

Upon the card, in small script, was inscribed:

Le Marquis de Chantal.

And in the corner of the card *Cercle Royal.*

Now Quinney had a good friend and patron, the Marquess of Mel, who happened to be in London at his house in St. James's Square. After his Gallic visitor had gone Quinney rang up that noble and puissant prince, and had a reassuring chat with him over the telephone. Lord Mel did not know Monsieur de Chantal, but he knew of him. He was the head of an ancient family, long established in La Vendée, and well known in Paris. It was quite likely that he possessed a Paul Lamerie cup, and he might wish to dispose of it quietly. Lord Mel concluded: "French plate fetches a ridiculous price in London, and it is probable that English plate is much undervalued in Paris."

Quinney thanked his kind patron for this enlightening information.

Next morning, when he examined the cup, he came to the conclusion that nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. Paul Lamerie had been the famous silversmith of his day. He had worked, it is true, most of his life in London, but some of his masterpieces must have been bought by Frenchmen. An ancestor of the Marquis had bought the cup which an impoverished descendant wished to sell. To get the biggest price for so beautiful a specimen, it might have been wiser to put it up at Christie's.

But that meant a publicity from which Monsieur de Chantal might shrink.

Quinney waited for him with impatience.

At eleven punctually the gentleman presented himself.

"Well," he asked, "what do you think of it?"

"It's a very handsome cup," said Quinney cautiously, "and it weighs nearly a hundred ounces, Troy."

"Do you care to buy it?"

"What do you ask for it, my lord?"

He was not quite sure whether a mere French marquis should be so addressed, but he deemed it expedient to be on the safe side.

"What do I ask? But I leave that to you. To set a price, I mean. Then I can take your money or—or take away the cup. It's a valuable piece of plate, but I have no *expertise* in your English plate. I come to you because my friends tell me you are to be trusted."

Quinney looked slightly disconcerted. Such awkward exigencies were not altogether new to him. And if he named too low a figure this aristocratic gentleman might smile sweetly, shake his handsome head, and vanish with the cup. But he had made up his mind what the cup was worth to him, and it was possible that the Marquis had other objects of *vertu* which he might bring to a trustworthy dealer.

"I'll give five hundred pounds, not a penny more or less. But if I buy it I hope to get much more, you understand. I shall hang on to it till I do. That's my way of doing business, my lord. Sooner or later a customer comes along who pays my figure.

Till then I have the pleasure of looking at a 'gem.'"

"I quite understand. For family reasons, Mr. Quinney, I do not wish to put my cup up at Christie's."

At this moment the telephone bell tinkled sharply.

"Please excuse me," said Quinney.

Monsieur de Chantal bowed. Quinney picked up the receiver and placed it to his ear. A second later he said with marked deference:

"The Duke of Bellingham has asked if you are here, my lord. His Grace wishes to speak to you."

"Ah, yes; I told him to ring me up."

Quinney then listened to the following:

"Is that you, my dear Bellingham? It is de Chantal speaking. Yes. I will lunch with you at Claridge's with pleasure. What? *No*, no—quite impossible. I'm returning to Paris to-night. *Bon! A toute-à-l'heure!*"

He hung up the 'phone and turned politely to Quinney.

"Very many thanks," he murmured. "What were we talking about? Ah! the cup, to be sure. You offer me five hundred. I will take your cheque on one condition: you will not make public the fact that I—I"—he slightly emphasized the personal pronoun—"have been compelled to part with my beloved cup. I have others, and it will hardly be missed at home, still——"

His pleasant voice melted upon a silence. Quinney nodded.

"That's quite all right."

The cheque was duly made out, and a receipt signed. The Frenchman left the sanctuary. From

the Georgian windows, Quinney could see him step into a smart car.

" A good morning's work," said Quinney to himself, as he sat down to enjoy full possession of the Paul Lamerie cup.

II

He was still admiring the superlative craftsmanship when Susan, his wife, came bustling into the sanctuary. Since the marriage of her daughter, Mrs. Quinney had interested herself in " waifs and strays," creatures of flesh and blood, in salient contrast to what she stigmatized as " sticks and stones "—the " things " beloved by the famous dealer.

" Look at that, Susie ! "

Mrs. Quinney eyed the cup with malevolence. After long and sad experience, she was well aware that a new " first favourite " had just been enthroned in her lord's affections. Nevertheless, being a discreet woman, with an object in view that justified dissimulation, she said pleasantly :

" I *am* looking at it. You didn't get that given away with a packet o' tea, did you ? "

" I paid five hundred pounds for it, old girl."

" And what will you sell it for, Joe ? "

" May be, it's not for sale."

" Another idol, I suppose ? "

" You're as near right as a woman can be. Makes me feel a younger and better man just to pass my fingers over it."

He caressed it lovingly, as he spoke. Susan sniffed and then smiled.

"I want some money out of you, Joe, for my Rags and Tatters Home. If you're really feeling younger and better, *and better*," she repeated, "you can afford to be generous."

"I shan't grudge a pound or two," said Quinney superbly.

"A pound or two. I want fifty pounds, Joe. That's a tenth of the profit you mean to make on that cup."

"Fifty pound——! Dotty, you are——!"

"Yes—we're two of a kind. You go crazy over graven images; I'm dotty, as you put it, over kiddies."

"Queen o' beggars, by gum!"

"Write me a nice cheque, Joe, and I won't bother you again for ever so long."

"For how long, Mrs. Stand-and-deliver?"

"Not till next month, Joe."

"And this is the twenty-ninth! It's a Paul Lamerie cup, old dear."

"Never heard of him."

"I dessay not," Quinney chuckled. "And the noble owner as was never heard of him neither."

"Noble owner?"

"French marquis."

"A Frenchy? I hope he came by it lawfully, Joe."

"Friend o' the Duke o' Bellingham. And a perfect gentleman. I ain't to be flimflammed by rogues, my girl. You can trust me."

"You *have* been had, Joe."

"When I was young and green, Susie. Now—you off it, and, perhaps, I'll give you a fiver."

Quinney locked up the cup and betook himself

to Christie's. In the rooms he found, as he expected, an expert on plate, who displayed enthusiasm when he heard of the Paul Lamerie two-handled cup. Indeed, his interest was so challenged that he expressed a wish to see it.

"You can see it," said Quinney, "and we'll have a bite of the best ham in London afterwards."

"What did you fork out for it, Joe?"

"Ah! You can make a guess at that after you've looked at the beauty."

They walked back to Soho Square discoursing at length upon treasure trove and values.

As soon as the cup was taken from the safe, the expert congratulated Quinney solemnly, affirming that he had never beheld a finer specimen or one in better preservation.

"Where on earth did you find it?"

Quinney told the tale with gusto. The expert nodded.

"I can lay my hands on a collector who'll give you a whacking profit."

Quinney betrayed uneasiness.

"I can't bear the thought of selling it," he muttered.

Upon the cup was exquisitely engraved a coat of arms, with supporters, surmounted by a coronet. The expert said with authority:

"That's an English coat, Joe, with a ducal coronet."

"And what of it?" asked Quinney.

"Nothing, but if you have a peerage handy, we'll find out who owned that cup before it went to France."

"I have an old peerage," said Quinney.

"The older the better; you fetch it."

Within five minutes, the expert said triumphantly:

"We've got the whole thing here. This cup was made for the second Duke of Bellingham, and the aunt of the present duke married a Marquis de Chantal. Probably the cup was a wedding gift. You're in big luck, Joe. I don't mind telling you now that I didn't quite like your yarn about a Frenchman drifting in here with that cup. It sounded a bit fishy. And then his being rung up by the Duke of Bellingham. I shied at that, too. But your duke and marquis are cousins. Probably the duke told the young man to go to you."

"More 'n likely," assented Quinney. "I've told Susan again and again that a reputation for honesty is my biggest asset. Now—let's tackle the ham."

III

After luncheon two large cigars were smoked leisurely, and then Quinney found himself once more alone with his cup. At about three Lord Mel appeared. Quinney was not surprised. His kind patron often dropped in for a friendly chat, and he, too, was a connoisseur of old silver.

"I have come to tell you more about the Marquis de Chantal."

"You are very kind, my lord."

"I am feeling slightly uneasy."

"Uneasy?"

"He is not in London."

Cold shivers meandered up and down Quinney's spine.

"Not in London," he gasped.

"No; he is a sad cripple, a martyr to arthritis.

He has not left his château in La Vendée for more than a year. A friend of mine at my club told me this after luncheon to-day, and fearing that something might be wrong I hastened here to you."

"How old is the Marquis de Chantal, my lord?"

"Over sixty, I should say."

"The young man who sold me the cup asked for a cheque. Ought I to stop that cheque?"

"Most assuredly—if you can."

But, alas! within a few minutes word came from the bank, over the 'phone, that a cheque signed by Joseph Quinney made payable to bearer had been cashed at five and twenty minutes to twelve that morning."

"You made it payable to bearer?" asked Lord Mel.

"He asked me to do so. And—and a few minutes before he had been talking over my 'phone with the Duke of Bellingham."

"Who is shooting in Westmoreland, as I happen to know."

"I've been done," groaned Quinney, "crisp as a biscuit. The cup belonged to the second Duke of Bellingham. And an aunt of the present duke married the Marquis de Chantal. It's all in Burke, my lord."

"The cup, Quinney, must have been stolen. Probably by a clever rogue of a servant, who knew about the Bellingham connection and used his knowledge to good purpose. I can only suggest calling in the police at once."

"That means labelling myself as the biggest mug in the trade."

" It goes without saying that the cup will be missed and eventually claimed."

" I don't keep stolen goods, my lord. You know that."

" Everybody knows it, my dear fellow."

Lord Mel went away. Quinney sent for a particular friend of his, a private detective.

IV

The private detective looked like a prosperous suburban dentist. His eyes were mistily blue; he moved slowly; indeed, he was the last man to challenge attention in any company, which may have accounted for his success in an arduous profession.

He listened pensively to Quinney's story, asking no questions till the dealer had finished. Then he grasped the tale firmly:

" Let me see the receipt."

John Williams looked long and hard at the signature of Réné de Chantal.

" Not a first offence," he murmured.

" Hay ? "

" He has signed his master's name before. I accept unreservedly Lord Mel's hypothesis. Only a trusted servant could have had access to such a valuable piece of plate. If the Marquis de Chantal is an invalid, probably he doesn't entertain. Such a cup might, presumably, be stolen and not missed for a long time. A servant could have possessed himself of the visiting card. A servant would have known of the Bellingham connection. He spoke,

you say, perfect English. It is quite likely that he is English."

Mr. Williams relapsed into silence, whilst Quinney groaned.

"Let me see the visiting card, Mr. Quinney."

After careful inspection of the card, the oracle spoke again:

"The card is genuine enough."

"Anybody can have a card printed."

"Pardon me! This is a highly glazed card, beautifully engraved. We are dealing with no common thief. He may have stolen other articles of value, and he came to London—the best market. Describe his appearance to me as accurately as you can."

Quinney did so. Mr. Williams rose.

"I will report in an hour's time."

"He said he was returning to Paris to-night."

"I have made a mental note of that."

Left alone, Quinney summoned the faithful Susan. In no uncertain terms he bewailed his unhappy lot.

"Down and out I am, Susie. Time I retired——! Five hundred of the best——!"

"But, Joe, you have the cup."

"Ho! That's a good 'un from a reg'lar churchgoer."

"You paid your money for it and it's yours."

"No, it ain't, Mrs. Smarty. I've my reputation to think of. Lord Mel and others know all about the cup. There'll be a rare hullabaloo when it's missed."

"May be Mr. Williams 'll catch him?"

"Not an unborn puppy's chance o' that."

Susan said obstinately:

"I say the cup's yours, Joe."

"Go it! Keep on a-sayin' it! You have the morals o' your waifs an' strays, you have. But I'll tell you this, Mrs. Stolen Goods: 'tisn't the loss o' the money that mads me. I can get that back by refusing to weigh in to your charities. No; it's bein' done, it's bein' had. And the press 'll get hold of it. That fair tears me, old lass."

"No; it's losing the cup tears you, Joe. You'd sooner lose me, yes, you would."

"What a tale——!"

"You'd have worshipped the golden calf if Paul What's-his-name had made it."

Quinney scowled at her.

"I sent for you, Susan Quinney, because I wanted sympathy. That, seemin'ly, is not on tap. Now, I'll have a glass o' brown sherry."

"Drink the poison out o' that precious cup, I would."

"Right you are, Mrs. Pussyfoot. I will."

And with Susan's disdainful eye upon him he did.

V

In less than the appointed hour Mr. Williams returned, but his face betrayed neither hope nor despair as he said quietly:

"The man who sold you that cup has not left London, Mr. Quinney."

"Ho! May be you can take me to him. And then——"

"And then——?"

The muscles of Joe Quinney were contracted as he replied savagely:

"I'd like to hit him one on the jaw. His 'jaw' did me in. But you're a fair marvel, you are. How did you find him, hay? And where?"

"I told you that he was no common thief." Quinney nodded. "For example, he hired a smart car. You seem to have hired a smart office boy."

"That's me. I always get the best."

"Your office boy noticed the car and its number."

"Did he? That boy 'll have his salary raised."

"I found out where the car came from, because the chauffeur wore a livery adopted by a firm that lets out smart cars to smart people."

"By gum! they ought to let out cars to you for nothing."

"It seems," continued Mr. Williams impassively, "that this car was hired by your man and sent to the hotel where he is stopping. He is there now. And he is leaving for Paris—so I understand—to-night."

"Not if I know meself," exclaimed Quinney. He jumped up, afire with excitement. "Come on, old lad. It's in me to down him harder than he downed me."

"Just so. A taxi is waiting for us downstairs."

"Where is the hotel?" asked Quinney.

Mr. Williams named a quiet old-fashioned hotel not far from St. James's Street. Upon the way thither, he added a few details. The young man had registered as Réné de Chantal. The people at the hotel had no suspicion that he was other than what he represented himself to be. He had arrived

the day before from Paris. He had asked the manager of the hotel to provide a good car; he was occupying a sitting-room with bed and bathroom attached.

"He has, of course, an accomplice," said Mr. Williams. "The person who 'phoned him."

"Two gaol birds at one shot," said Quinney. His hair bristled; his eyes sparkled.

"You enjoy a scrap?" asked Mr. Williams.

"You bet! Don't you?"

"No; I have had too many of 'em."

"An old campaigner, hay? Well, what's the plan? Frontal attack, what?"

"My inquiries have been discreet," affirmed Mr. Williams. "No suspicions have been aroused. If our man is at home, we will have a quiet word with the manager before we attempt——"

"Violence," exploded Quinney.

"There will be no necessity, I hope, for violence. You want your money back."

"I want more than that, my lad."

"What else?"

"If we cop him fair and square, and land him in gaol, it will be the finest kind of 'ad' for me."

"As your confidential adviser, Mr. Quinney, I may point out to you that your first objective should be the recovery of the money."

"We'll have that first."

"Or what is left of it."

"He ain't had time to blow in much. I dessay he's looking forward to a beano in Paris."

"Possibly. His accomplice is a woman."

"What you say?"

"She is staying at the hotel as his wife."

Quinney assimilated this fresh information in stupefied silence. The taxi sped down a side street and stopped.

"Here we are," said Mr. Williams. "We will interview the manager first."

Quinney, mopping a fevered brow, followed his confidential adviser into a snug hall. A page ushered them into the presence of the manager. Very curtly and lucidly the facts in the case were stated by Mr. Williams.

After absorbing them, the manager said deprecatingly:

"The gentleman and his wife are upstairs now, having tea. This is a quiet hotel for quiet people. If—if matters could be arranged—quietly——?"

"Compoundin' a felony?" sputtered Quinney.

The manager shrugged his shoulders, glancing interrogatively at the confidential adviser.

"We don't know," said Mr. Williams lightly, "that this cup was stolen. This man may be acting for the real Marquis de Chantal."

"Then why does he steal his name?" asked Quinney. "Anyway, let me see him, alone. You can be handy, Williams, in the bathroom, hay? If this chap can satisfy me, there won't be any trouble, but," he set his square jaw, "I'll take a deal o' satisfying."

"I will show Mr. Quinney into the sitting-room," said the manager.

"Now you're talkin'."

Quinney stood up, clenching his fists. The manager

opened the door, and began to ascend the thickly carpeted stairs.

"Announce me as Mr. Joseph Quinney, please."

The sitting-room was on the first floor.

"Mr. Joseph Quinney."

Quinney found himself face to face with a sparkling brunette. The door of the sitting-room closed. The pseudo marquis was not to be seen. Quinney stifled a groan, and silently cursed his confidential adviser. The sitting-room faced the street. Obviously, the bird, espying the taxi, had flown. The sparkling brunette, speaking with a French accent, said graciously:

"Ah! my hosband spoke to me of Mr. Quinnee. You will sit down, will you not, till he come."

Quinney obeyed, thinking to himself: "I shall sit here for some time." However, he said civilly:

"Your husband has gone out, madam?"

"Oh, no. He is ver' busy packing. You will drink a cup o' tea, no?"

Quinney confessed afterwards to his Susan that he was "rattled." Susan immediately leapt to the conclusion that the "accomplice" was good-looking, which, indeed, happened to be true. Quinney put it that she had "a way with her."

He declined the cup of tea, and asked to see madame's husband.

"You are in a hurry, Mr. Quinnee?"

"Not particularly, madam, but——"

"*Bon!* Monsieur de Chantal knows that tea is here. He will be delighted to see you. You make —how you say?—yes—an impression on my hosband, because you are so—so 'onest. I guess why you have

come. You think that we have other things, no? that perhaps we might wish to sell to you."

"Have you?" asked Quinney bluntly. He was now alert and more at his ease. And he had noticed that the lady had spoken in a lower tone of voice.

"Alas! Yes. But you do not buy jewellery, hein?"

"I might," said Quinney cautiously.

The lady's voice became a whisper.

"I have some emeralds, Mr. Quinnee, beautiful emeralds. My hosband would be angry eef I sold them, but, between us two, I want to sell my emeralds because we are so poor. And you are so 'onest that, perhaps, you will tell me of some man, also 'onest, who might buy my emeralds."

Quinney nodded, hardly able to speak. The "ad" that would demonstrate to a wondering world that he was the cleverest as well as the honestest dealer in London flared in headlines before his eyes. He had the cup. By the exercise of a little tact he might get possession of the emeralds.

"Can I see them, madam?"

Madame smiled and lifted two pretty hands to her neck. From beneath what appeared to be a sable stole she unclasped a string of fine emeralds, which she handed confidingly to Quinney. He knew nothing about precious stones, but, if these were genuine, they must, he reckoned, be worth even more than the Paul Lamerie cup. He stared hard at them. As he did so, he heard what is called in stageland a "noise off."

"Put them in your pocket," commanded madame, in a hurried whisper.

The astounded Quinney did so, as the husband of madame entered the sitting-room from the bedroom. He advanced smilingly :

" Mr. Quinney ? This is a pleasant surprise. I am charmed to see you."

Quinney replied doggedly :

" It was a big bit o' luck finding you in."

As he spoke he glanced uneasily at madame. He wanted to settle his account in full with monsieur, but madame was pouring out the tea, and smiling coquettishly at him, as much as to say : " We have a leetle secret between us, Mr. Quinnee, no ? "

" Sit down and have a cup of tea."

" Mr. Quinnee does not drink tea," said madame, " but perhaps, Réné, you might tempt 'im with something stronger."

" Nothing for me," replied Quinney stoutly. Nevertheless he sat down, wondering what would happen next. The feel of the emeralds in his pocket fortified his resolution to play up and play the game.

" You want to see me on business, Mr. Quinney ? "

" Yes—business."

" All in good time," murmured madame. " It is dreadful, isn't it, that we should have to do business on our honeymoon ? "

" Honeymoon," repeated Quinney.

" Yes ; we were married less than a week ago. You did not—how you say ?—*spot* us as honeymooners, Mr. Quinnee ? "

" Frankly, madam, I never suspected it."

" It is so nice of you to say that. But you are a nice man. That jumps to the eye."

Quinney moved uneasily in his chair. He failed

to envisage this agreeable couple as gaol birds. And he had expected some indication of confusion. But monsieur remained quite as cool as his charming wife.

Monsieur said quietly:

"There is no reason, Mr. Quinney, why you shouldn't talk business before my wife. And your time, of course, is valuable."

"I'm up against the cleverest thieves in France," thought Quinney. He was glad that he had refused tea. Madame might have slipped something into it other than sugar or milk.

"My time is my own," growled Quinney, "and has been for many a year."

"You do not regret buying the cup?"

"No."

"Tell me—how did you discover this hotel? Perhaps I had scribbled the address upon my card?"

"I think you forgot to do that," said Quinney. He continued gruffly: "I want a little more information about the cup. That coat of arms, now. I found it in Burke's Peerage."

"Perfectly. Does it detract from the value of the cup?"

"Not at all."

"Then I don't quite understand——?"

"You will—presently."

At this, madame, being a woman of tact, got up, and so did Quinney.

"I leave you to your business, but I return. I, too, wish to talk business with Mr. Quinnee."

Her husband opened the bedroom door for her. As she passed through it, she smiled at him innocently.

In the long ago Susan had bestowed just such a smile upon her Joe, albeit he was red-headed and freckled. The smile left Quinney confounded. He was apt to rush to conclusions; and he decided instantly that this pretty Frenchwoman was not a thief but the victim of a thief, who had beguiled her—the rascal!

"The game is up," said Quinney.

"Really? What game?"

"The game you are playing. I'll admit you're a player, but I'm not quite the damned fool you took me to be."

Monsieur lifted slightly supercilious brows.

Quinney went on:

"It would pay such a clever fellow as you are to be honest. I don't know much about French law, but in your country, I'm told, they 'reconstruct' a crime."

"You have not been misinformed. Pray go on!"

"I can reconstruct this crime. You wanted to marry a pretty innocent girl, and Joe Quinney is the last man to blame you for that."

"Thanks. So far you are correct."

"Matrimony comes expensive since the war." Monsieur bowed. "And you hadn't saved much. It occurred to your thoughtful mind that a valuable cup not used for many years wouldn't be missed, hay?"

"This is surprising but perfectly true."

"You knew, also, that London was your market?"

"I did."

"So, one night, when nobody was about, you slipped the cup into your suit case."

"You are reconstructing this crime admirably."

"When you took the cup, you took some emeralds."

"Emeralds? What can you know about the emeralds?"

"You don't deny you took them?"

"I don't. What of it?"

"I take my hat off to you, as the coolest card I've ever met. You ought to be serving your country."

"But I am, Mr. Quinney. And I hope to serve your country, too."

"You may," said Quinney grimly.

"I confess," said monsieur, not so patiently, "that I'm utterly at a loss to understand you. You seem to take the most extraordinary and well-informed interest in my private affairs, which assuredly do not concern you. Your time, obviously, is not valuable, but mine is. I wish you good-day, Mr. Quinney."

"You're a cock o' the game," said Quinney, almost admiringly, "but if I leave this room before I've settled in full with you, the police will come in. Climb down, young feller, climb down."

But, to his immense surprise, the "young feller" burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter. When this had partially subsided, he crossed to the telephone, and spoke down it.

"Please ring up the French Embassy for me."

Then he turned, still laughing, to Quinney.

"I perceive, Mr. Quinney, that this is a case of mistaken identity. When the French Embassy ring us up, I want you to ask them if they know the Marquis de Chantal, and the name of the hotel where he is staying in London. You may have to wait a few minutes."

"The Marquis de Chantal is an old man, crippled with arthritis, who has not left his house for a year."

"Ah! Light is coming to me. My father died three months ago. I have succeeded to a large and impoverished estate. I am also in the Diplomatic Service and hope to be attached to our embassy here. If you are feeling as warm as you look, may I offer you a whisky and soda?"

"P-p-please," stammered Quinney.

VI

The French Embassy "got through" before the whisky and soda, and the shamefaced Quinney was constrained by a still laughing Frenchman to ask the necessary questions. Then he said hurriedly:

"I shall have to tell my wife about this, my lord, but don't tell yours."

"I agree."

"I'd like to make a bolt of it before she comes back."

The Marquis de Chantal held out his hand.

"If you insist——!"

Quinney moved to the door. And then he remembered the emeralds.

"Her ladyship wanted to speak to me on business."

"So she did. Wait!"

He opened the bedroom door and called to madame, who appeared at once.

"I heard you laughing, Réné. What was the joke?"

"Mr. Quinney was reconstructing a crime for me, but the criminal escaped, and so do I."

Still laughing, he vanished. Quinney pulled out the emeralds and returned them to their owner.

"You mustn't sell these, madam. You can take it from me that your husband will be an ambassador some day, and then you'll need 'em. I wish you both the best of luck."

For the second time Quinney moved to the door and paused.

"Excuse the question, madam, but did you lunch with the Duke of Bellingham at Claridge's to-day?"

"Yes, we did. But—why?"

"Nothing. I was told that his Grace was in Westmoreland."

"Yes; but he came down to see us. My husband is his first cousin, you know."

"I know," said Quinney, retreating swiftly.

He was rather "short" in explaining matters to Mr. Williams and the manager, but he had recovered his equanimity when he met Susan. After gratifying to the full a wife's curiosity, he observed cheerfully: "All's well that ends well. The cup is mine, Susie, *and it ain't for sale!*"

He was standing in the sanctuary, with the lights full on, staring at the cup as he spoke. Susan slipped to his desk, and pulled out a cheque-book.

"Now what are you up to?"

Susan opened the cheque-book, dipped a pen into ink, and handed it, coaxingly, to her lord.

"Make it fifty, Joe, and then nobody 'll ever know."

"Shut your eyes, old lass!"

She did so; Quinney filled in the cheque, and slipped it into her hand.

"Look!"

"Joe——!"

"Yes; man o' surprises I am. You didn't half know your luck when you married me."

The cheque for the Waifs and Strays was filled in for a hundred pounds.

A Nocturnal Visitor

I

"GENTLY," said Quinney. "Gently, you ginger-headed Bolshevist!"

He was addressing one of his assistants, a newcomer, who, according to other members of the staff, held communistic and, indeed, anarchistic views on the sacred subject of property. Quinney, however, had engaged him because he was a first-class packer.

An ancient coffer was being lowered out of a delivery wagon. It reached the pavement safely. Then the assistant remarked quietly:

"My political opinions don't concern you, Mr. Quinney."

"Oh, don't they? In my premises everything and everybody concerns me, my lad. I'm told that you talk a lot of pestiferous nonsense. I don't pay you good wages for that. Get it off your chest on Sundays, if you like, near the Marble Arch."

The man looked sullen but made no reply. The chest, after due consideration, was placed in the inner hall against the fine staircase. Quinney eyed it with affection, and presently summoned Susan his wife to have a "squint" at it. Susan still cherished a sentimental attachment to old oak, because

she and her Joe had bought old oak in Brittany during their honeymoon. And old oak—as connoisseurs are aware—had been the bedrock on which the famous dealer had built his ever-increasing business.

Susan, therefore, smiled amiably at the coffer.

"Is it French, Joe?"

Quinney snorted.

"English—every bit of it, and in tiptop condition."

"It's lovely," admitted Susan. "I wonder whether it's mothproof, Joe?"

Quinney divined what was passing through the mind of a careful housewife, and he had remarked instantly that the coffer was in its appointed place. Being there, it was disagreeable to think of the inner hall without it.

"It's yours, Susie. I give it to you. You can keep your winter blankets in it, or furs, or anything else, old girl."

Susan kissed him.

"Know anything about it, Joe?"

"Not a thing. A fellow showed me a photograph of it. It was in a sort of depository off the Tottenham Court Road. I went to look at it, bought it fairly reasonable, and there you are."

"Please open it."

But—to Quinney's annoyance—the chest was locked, and the big steel key missing. Quinney remembered the key.

"Key will turn up to-morrow," said Quinney. "The man at the depository has it."

He went upstairs, followed by Susan. On the first landing he beckoned her into the sanctuary.

"I don't like this chap Cookson."

" Why, Joe, only the day before yesterday you were crackin' him up to me."

" He *is* cracked, Susie. Common sense just runs out of him. A Bolshevist, by gum! I shall sack him. He's a contaminator, he is; he debauches innocent minds. Wants a Soviet government here in old England."

" Well, I never!"

" He'll get the order of the boot at the end o' the week. Anything tasty for supper, Sue? The sight o' that beautiful oak gives me a rare appetite."

" Spare ribs of pork, Joe, and I do hope you won't be greedy, because pork keeps you awake, dear, and you know it."

" It's worth it," replied the autocrat pensively.

II

Quinney enjoyed his supper, and paid for it as the wise Susan predicted. He awoke shortly after midnight, and envied Susan, who slept as sound as a dormouse. Presently he slipped from the big four-poster and put on his dressing-gown and slippers. With these he assumed a very artful expression, as became the possessor of many precious objects not fully insured against loss through burglary. Unless his sharp ears had deceived him, somebody was moving in the sanctuary just below his bedroom. Quinney seized an electric torch, and crept a-tiptoe into the passage. One of the maids might be walking in her sleep. In the basement of the ancient house a trusted craftsman " slept in." Quinney was reasonably sure that nothing would awaken him.

He listened for a moment. The staircase and hall were in darkness. He crept down the stairs, remembering that eventful night so long ago when he had found his daughter Posy and James Miggot keeping midnight tryst. Susan had been with him then.

There was a light in the sanctuary.

Quinney paused, full of indignation rather than fear. He was unarmed. He could not use a pistol if he owned one. In any case, he relied upon his shrewd wits.

It was difficult to believe that anybody could have got into the house from the outside. Difficult, but not impossible. Also, he had unshakable confidence in his craftsmen. It occurred to him that one of the maids might be in collusion with a bold burglar. The premises of a famous art collector had been successfully burgled some months before, and the burglar—so it transpired—had been admitted by a housemaid, who actually opened the front door to him, and provided him with food and drink in the dining-room.

He knew, of course, that if this were a real attempt at burglary, he would be dealing with experts. The ordinary burglar was not tempted to acquire miniatures and china and pictures, which could only be sold in a small market.

Standing perfectly still, his active mind worked furiously. He might 'phone for the police; he might creep to the basement and arouse his man; he might slip through his own front door, and hunt up the nearest constable.

Had he left the light on in the sanctuary?

For the life of him he couldn't answer this ques-

tion. Such an incident had happened to him more than once. And at night-time old houses became vocal. Boards creaked, windows rattled. Quinney began to fear not burglars, but ridicule. To summon assistance and then to find—nothing! What a tit-bit for his enemies!

Finally, he decided that he had forgotten to turn out one light. He remembered switching on the current that illuminated his best china cabinet. Turning out the other lights on leaving the room, he must have forgotten this.

He hurried to the door and opened it.

In the middle of the room stood a slim boy in mechanic's clothes; a boy whom he had never set eyes on before. They stared at each other.

"Who the blazes are you?" growled Quinney. "And what are you doing here?"

The boy remained silent. Quinney detected fright in his eyes. He detected, also, a basket, and some paper—tissue-paper—and some rolls of cotton-wool. The drawers of his desk were open. They must have been forced open.

Savagely he jumped upon the boy, caught his arm, and twisted it behind his back.

"Speak up, you little devil!"

Not a word.

Unduly irritated by this disdainful silence, Quinney passed his hand roughly over the boy's body. He might carry a weapon and, being a boy, would be likely to use it.

The boy wriggled beneath the rough hand, and Quinney burst out laughing.

"By gum! You're a girl!"

He dropped the captive arm, and locked the door leading to the landing. The big Georgian windows, facing the square, were still shuttered. He was " tiled in " with a girl-burglar, and puzzled out of his wits. He sat down, staring at his visitor.

" Did I hurt you ? " he asked.

She answered faintly :

" Yes ; you did."

Her voice held a slight Cockney inflection ; but it was soft and curiously sweet.

" You ain't alone in this house ? " asked Quinney.

She shrugged her shoulders. Then she had the impudence to smile derisively. Quinney got up and went to one of the windows. He let down the heavy iron bars, pulled aside a shutter, and peered blinkingly into the square. A waning moon illuminated it. Nobody was in sight. Still peering, he heard a click. He turned swiftly, as a door slammed. The girl had vanished.

It was done so neatly, with such swiftness and unexpectedness, that for a moment Quinney was paralysed by surprise. He rushed to the door and opened it. As he did so, he heard another slam just below him.

A more cautious man would have hesitated. Quinney, however, was mad, not with the girl—as he admitted later to Susan—but with himself. This baggage had outwitted him. She had escaped. To recapture her became the dominant instinct.

He switched on the hall lights and sped downstairs into the inner hall. It was empty. The outer hall presented just such an amazing vacuum. Instantly, he satisfied himself that the front door was locked

and bolted. His nocturnal visitor must be still in the house.

Hesitating, petrified anew with astonishment, Quinney heard a heavy step. The door leading to the basement opened, and his man appeared.

"Seen anybody?" asked Quinney.

"I heard a door slam, sir. I jumped out o' bed."

"You haven't seen a girl—a boy, I mean?"

"No, sir."

Master and man stared at each other. Quinney recited the facts.

"And now," he concluded, "where is she?"

Together they made an exhaustive inspection of the basement and the rooms on the ground floor. It was clear to the meanest intelligence that nobody could have got in. It was equally clear that somebody couldn't have got out.

At this interesting moment, when Quinney was pinching himself to make sure that he was awake, Susan appeared.

Hearing the story, she eyed her masterful lord with faint suspicion. Indeed, she believed him to be the victim of nightmare. But Quinney's powers of diction overwhelmed her.

"If the girl isn't downstairs, Joe, she may be up."

Quinney shook his head.

"The second slam came from this hall," he affirmed. "I'll swear to that, Susie."

"Must be a ghost," said Susan.

"Does a ghost carry a basket and tissue-paper and cotton-wool?"

Susan was constrained to admit that ghosts, as a

rule, were not so equipped. The basket confronted her wondering eyes a second or two later.

"She must be here," said Susan.

"Yes; you find her, old dear."

Susan descended majestically to the inner hall. She knew her Quinney. She could take his word that the search had been exhaustive.

Appealing, not in vain, to the trustiest weapon in woman's armoury, she exclaimed triumphantly:

"I know where she is!"

"Ho! You know where she is, Mrs. Smarty?"

Susan replied tranquilly:

"I know where she is, Joe, because you know where she isn't. You and Harry have been into every hole and corner."

"We have."

"And she must be somewhere."

"Aye; somewhere in this house."

"You're sitting on her," said Susan.

Quinney bounded from the oak chest.

"By gum!" he exclaimed. "I picked a winner when I chose you, Sue. The hussy can't be nowheres else. Bless you, dearie! What a helpmeet!"

"It was the lid of that chest which slammed," said Susan, "when she jumped back into it."

Quinney tried the lid of the coffer. Then he bent down to listen. There were cracks in the ancient panels which might well let in air and let out sound.

Presently he chuckled, as he lifted his head.

"She is in there," he announced. "She knows the game's up. And she's crying like a child."

"Shall I bust open the lid?" asked the faithful retainer.

"No!" snapped Susan. "You leave her to me."

She waved the men aside, and addressed the ancient coffer.

"You come out, dear. This old chest is mine. My husband gave it to me. And you're mine, too, because you're in it. I'll look after you, you pore thing. Open the lid, like a good girl."

"She claims the girl," said Quinney.

"Yes, I do, Joe. She's in my chest." Her voice melted again. "Open the lid, dear. You needn't be afraid."

The lid of the chest was raised slowly, and a tear-stained face appeared. Susan, waving aside the two men, held back the lid till the Jill-in-the-box stepped limply out of it.

"You can go back to bed, Harry," said Mrs. Quinney.

Harry retired reluctantly.

"We'll go upstairs," said Susan.

"Is this young woman a particular friend of yours, Susie?" asked Quinney scornfully.

"Yes," replied Susan tartly; "she is."

She took the girl's arm, pressed it reassuringly, and led her upstairs and into the sanctuary. Quinney followed, half-angry, half-amused, wholly curious.

"Get her something to eat," commanded Susan; "and don't make a clatter. This is my affair."

Quinney obeyed. He felt forced to acclaim woman's wit and intuition. The prisoner seemed to have recovered composure, but tears trickled down her cheeks. They might mean anything or nothing, so Quinney reflected. He made his way to the larder.

III

As soon as the two women were alone, Susan said gently:

"Who are you, dear? Tell me. I want to be your friend, if you will let me."

But the girl remained silent.

Susan took her left hand and gazed at a significant ring. She noticed, too, that the fingers were thin and needle-pricked.

"Married, are you?"

The prisoner nodded.

"A mother, perhaps?"

"Not yet."

The words were almost inaudible.

"Well," said Susan cheerfully, "you'll feel ever so much better when you've had a bite and sup. Don't talk if you don't want to."

The young woman leant back in her chair, closing her eyes. A man might have been impatient with her; a woman knew better. Presently Quinney appeared with a tray. Susan took it.

"You can pop back to bed, Joe."

"Me? Am I the master of this house or not?"

"You don't own everything in it," said Susan.

"Pop off to bed!" repeated Quinney blankly.

"Yes, Joe—to—to please me."

"Shall I get our spare room ready for your lady friend?"

"You might do worse, but that ain't your job. You pop off, dear."

He did.

Susan's methods in handling burglars may be open

to criticism. They achieved one definite end—confession. The unexpected visitor opened her mouth to put food into it, and then, word by word, the truth slipped from a pair of trembling lips. Not all of it at first. And Susan had to supply links, which she did cleverly. The attempted burglary had been almost successful, defeated only by Quinney's fondness for spare ribs. Had Quinney slept the sleep of the one-helping consumer of the unclean beast, his visitor would have slipped with well-filled basket out of the front door. At this point in the narrative the teller of an amazing tale paused.

"But how did you know where to look for the things?" asked Susan. "I suppose your husband told you?"

Silence—so Susan decided—might be taken for assent. She continued:

"And he must have known his way about this house?"

No answer.

"You must love him very much to run such a dreadful risk for his sake?"

"He's my man, lady."

She closed her firm little lips, but her capable hands were trembling.

Susan nodded.

"Your man? Yes, we women do strange things for our men. All the same, he, not you, might have hid in that chest."

"He was too big, lady."

Susan's eyes were alert—too alert—so she let her lids fall.

"And I don't weigh much, lady. See?"

A pathetic inflection aroused pity in the elder woman. She divined that this waif—and she understood waifs—was defending her man against a charge of cowardice. She nodded solemnly.

"You and he must have wanted desperately what didn't belong to you."

"Some folks have too much; and others too little."

She seemed to have slight difficulty with her aspirates. Then, with sudden defiance, she said sharply:

"You can send me to prison, lady, but you can't send him. And for why? You won't never know who he is."

"But I do know," said Susan, in a whisper. "He works for us. His name is Cookson."

Mrs. Cookson burst into tears.

To stem the torrent, Susan made a rash promise.

"I don't think," she said deliberately, "that either you or your man will go to prison for this; but that —that," she repeated with emphasis, "depends upon you." Mrs. Cookson took instant notice.

"On—on *me?*" she sniffed.

"On you. I want to find out, if I can, if this man of yours is worthy of what you have tried to do for him. If he is, there is hope, perhaps, for you and him. If he isn't, if he is just a selfish, self-seeking beast, there is no hope for him or you."

"He isn't a beast. He's worked crool hard—for others. And his 'ealth is going. Shot through the lungs in the war—see? His own panel doctor told 'im 'e couldn't live much longer in London town. We was thinking of California."

Susan listened to much more that needn't be

recorded. The girl might, of course, be lying, but she hadn't the air of a liar. She had worked in a sweet-factory till she married. During the war, for the last two years of it, she had done her bit in a munitions works. According to her own statement, she could turn her hand to anything.

"Luck isn't for me," she concluded.

"You have pluck," said Susan. "Now, listen to me. I'll help you, if you'll do what I tell you."

"Yes, lady."

"At this moment your husband is expecting you. I don't ask where he is. I don't care. What will he do when you don't turn up?"

"I dunno, lady. I dessay he'll guess like that I've been copped."

"And if you hadn't been copped, would he have come here, as usual, to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes, lady. If he kep' away, he'd be suspected, wouldn't he?"

Susan agreed. Then she delivered her instructions. Mrs. Cookson listened attentively, much astonished at first, and inclined to be defiant. But Susan, you may be sure, had her way with her, extracted from her a pledge of obedience, pathetic inasmuch as it indicated unconditional surrender.

For the moment we will leave them.

IV

When Susan returned to the four-poster, she found her Joe sitting up in bed, horn spectacles on nose, reading a monograph on miniatures. He positively bristled with interrogation.

"Lady friend in the spare-room, hey?"

"You are right, as usual, Joe," replied Susan.

"Have you turned the key in the door, dearie?"

"Not necessary."

"Well, you're a knock-out, you are. Wormed everything out of her, I'll bet."

"I never practised 'worming,'" said Susan significantly, in allusion to those far-off days when Quinney junior was taught by an artful sire to make worm-holes in so-called "genuine antiques." She continued tranquilly: "I have found out what I wanted to know."

Secretly, Quinney was immensely pleased with her, but he dissembled with a wife who, on occasion, took the bit, so to speak, between her teeth and bolted.

"Reg'lar Mrs. Enquire-within-upon-everything, you are!"

"She is Mrs. Cookson, Joe."

Quinney sat up, spluttering with conviction.

"Of course she is! The wife of that dirty dog! I ought to have guessed it."

"But you didn't."

"No, Mrs. Rub-it-in, I didn't. Yes, he was packer to Lark and Bundy. I'll bet he found out where he could take stolen stuff to from them. By gum! he might take it *to* them!"

"You'll be had up for libel one day."

"Cookson! The Bolshy! I'll bolsh him to rights."

"You'll leave him to me, Joe. I think I'll go to sleep."

"Not yet, my girl. I'll bet a new hat that we don't see Cookson to-morrow, and your lady friend will have bolted."

"I'll take that bet, Joe. A new hat, you said? Paltry little bet for so rich a man!"

"Ho! Like to bet a hundred pounds on it?"

"Yes, I should."

"Right! We'll make it a hundred pounds, Susie. Sentiment is the chink in your armour, Mrs. Quinney. You're clever, I admit it, up to a point. Then you weaken. This young woman is a eel."

"*An* eel, please."

"Go it! She's a neel, then. Slippery as they make 'em. We shan't see either of 'em again."

"You go to sleep, Joe. What a talker!"

"Sleep!" He slipped out of bed. "I'm going downstairs. I shall do sentry-go in the sanctuary. She shan't slip off with my stuff. You'd trust a cobry capella."

"If I'd drawn his fangs, I would."

Quinney snorted, put on some warm clothes, and stumped out of the bedroom. Susan smiled pleasantly, laid her head upon the pillow, and fell asleep.

However, she was up before the maids were astir, and made some hot coffee, which she took to her Joe. Then she had a word with Harry, enjoining upon him strict secrecy. Lastly, she peeped silently into the spare-room. The bed was not empty. When the maids appeared, she told them that she had a guest in the spare-room who was not to be disturbed on any account.

Quinney, later on, retired to the bathroom, still positive that Mr. Cookson would not turn up.

But he did, at nine punctually, presenting a white, haggard face, and coughing volcanically. Harry, acting under Susan's instructions, set him to work pack-

ing. Harry said afterwards that the man was much agitated, but he asked no questions, and Harry saw to it that he remained in the basement.

Here, about ten, Susan found him. She had in her hand a slip of paper.

"Mr. Cookson," she murmured softly, "I want you to go to this address at once, and ask for the key of the coffer that came yesterday."

Cookson took the slip of paper. Susan went on suavely:

"Mr. Quinney has given the coffer to me, and I want to open it."

"Perhaps I can open it," said Cookson. He was moistening his white lips with a feverish tongue. He began to cough again.

"That's a sad cough you have."

"Yes, madam. It'll be worse before it's better. Shall I see if I can open that chest?"

"You can try, if you like."

Without another word, he hurried up the stone steps and into the inner hall. Susan followed leisurely, to find him staring in stupefaction at the coffer.

"It's a nice coffer, isn't it?"

Cookson bent down and tried the lid. He shook it impatiently.

"No violence, please," said Susan. "Perhaps," she added, "the lock could be picked—quite easily."

"I might do it," said Cookson.

He rushed off. Susan sat upon her chest. Presently Cookson came back with a stout bit of wire and a cold chisel. He knelt down. Susan drifted across the hall. She could almost swear that she heard Cookson speaking, but he might have been

muttering to himself. Susan drifted back to behold beads of sweat upon Cookson's forehead. And yet, picking locks is not heavy work.

The lock clicked, but Cookson didn't open the lid.

"I heard the lock click," said Susan. "Raise the lid."

Cookson did so. The coffer was empty.

"My God!" exclaimed Cookson.

"What is the matter, Mr. Cookson?"

"Nothing, madam; nothing."

"Did you expect to find anything in the coffer?"

"N-n-no, madam."

He stood trembling before her, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"You are very strangely agitated, Mr. Cookson. Are you feeling ill?"

"Yes, madam. I—I mean that I didn't sleep last night. I—I had a bad night."

"Dear, dear! A bad night? And Mr. Quinney and I always sleep so soundly. Come up to the sanctuary, and I'll give you a glass of wine."

He obeyed as if in a dream. As soon as he reached the sanctuary he glanced round him. He could see that the precious objects were in their place. An atmosphere of tranquil security seemed to pervade the delightful room.

"Sit down," commanded Susan.

She administered a glass-full of her Joe's brown sherry, always kept in a Waterford decanter discreetly hidden in a Chippendale cabinet. Cookson tossed it off gratefully.

"Were you in this room yesterday?" asked Susan.

"No, madam. I'm seldom in this room. Why—why do you ask?"

"Simply because I found this morning, in this room, a basket and some packing materials."

She moved to the window, and took from behind the brocade curtain Mrs. Cookson's basket and the tissue-paper and cotton-wool.

"I thought," she said slowly, "that you might have left this basket here. Have you seen it before?"

He remained silent, but his face was piteous to behold, lined with misery, haggard with suffering. Susan could hardly bear to look at it. She heard him mutter:

"I've lost her."

"Poor man! You have lost somebody dear to you? I am so sorry."

He covered his face with his hands.

"Whom have you lost?"

"My wife," he answered brokenly. "The best ever, too. But I tried her too high. Now—she's gone."

"You mean your wife has left you?"

He nodded.

"But—why?"

He jumped up, ablaze with excitement.

"Why?" he echoed savagely. "I'll tell you. Because she couldn't stick me; because she thinks me rotten; because—damn it!—I did try her—too high."

A sort of rigor seized him. His limbs shook; his jaws chattered. Suddenly, he pulled himself together.

"Please excuse me," he said politely. "My private affairs don't concern you. I'll go back to my work."

"Not yet," said Susan firmly. "Your private affairs do concern me. Have you been untrue to your wife?"

"Untrue?" He laughed bitterly. "Untrue? Not in the way you mean, madam. I loved every little bit of her, and there isn't much. But she's straight, and she thinks I ain't. That tore it. I thought it might. All last night I waited for her, and when she didn't come, I said to myself, 'I've torn it.' That's all."

"But it isn't," persisted Susan. "I'm a woman, and a wife; I don't believe that your wife, if she loved you, left you because you were not straight."

"S'pose I asked her to do the dirty?"

"Did you?" she cooed.

"Yes; I did."

"What did you ask her to do, Mr. Cookson? Tell me."

"S'pose I asked her to steal for me?"

"Women have done more than that for the sake of those they loved."

He stared at her, seeing her kind eyes and the sympathy radiating from her.

"You're a good sort. I'd like to make a clean breast of it to you——"

He hesitated.

"Do!"

He began slowly, groping his way.

"I was packer for Lark and Bundy before I came here."

"So Mr. Quinney told me."

"Robbers and thieves," exclaimed their ex-packer. "I was with them till I joined up, and afterwards.

Kings of the ' knockout ' they are ! Fakers, too, when they're dead-certain of not being found out. Receivers of stolen stuff, when it's offered cheap enough. And no questions asked."

" We know them," said Susan simply.

" When I fell ill, they sacked me. I got this job here, and my cough grew worse. I can't hold on much longer. The doctor told me sunshine might save me. And then I saw this room, saw the stuff in it, knew what to do with it, knew whom to go to in New York. I told my Nan what was in my mind. She fought against it, but I had my way with her. The only thing that bothered me was—how to work the game. If a man thinks hard enough, he can solve most problems. I bought that coffer downstairs."

He waited for some expression of surprise, but none came. Susan was listening attentively, with her hands placidly folded upon her lap.

" I took it to a depository. The rest was easy for any mechanic. I fixed the lock so that it would open on the inside. Mr. Quinney bought it, because a low price was asked, less than I gave for it. It was delivered yesterday with my little wife inside it. She's as clever as a monkey and as quiet as a mouse. She got into this room last night, but she couldn't stick the job or me. So she bolted. And, if I know her, she won't come back. I'm about done in, madam. You and Mr. Quinney can do what you please with Sam Cookson."

" It's a sad and exciting story," said Susan. " But I don't see how your wife got out of this house. The hall door was bolted and locked inside, as usual."

"She got out right enough. Trust her."

"You bought that coffer?" said Susan, with seeming irrelevance. "Have you saved much?"

"About enough to get us to California. But they don't want paupers in America. More was needed. I had to have a bit of capital."

"Are you angry with her because she failed you at the critical moment?"

"Angry? I've been a knave and a fool—and I know it. Now, you know it. Better send for the police, madam. They'll take me, and perhaps they'll find her. She might come back to me—I believe she would, bless her!—if she read in the papers that I was copped."

"Was this your first attempt at robbery?"

"First—and last."

Susan rose with great dignity.

"I want you to do, Mr. Cookson, exactly what I tell you, without asking questions. I ask you to trust me. Go back to your work. When you return home this afternoon, you will find your wife. No questions, please. This is my affair. Your wife will tell you everything. Mr. Quinney does big business with New York and San Francisco. I think, but I don't promise, that it can be arranged that you should work in California. You might take out some valuable stuff for us. I must speak to Mr. Quinney about that. Don't thank me." She held up a small hand. "Thank your wife, when you see her. She didn't fail you; she wanted to do the dirty for you. Go back to your work."

V

Susan returned to her lord. When Cookson did turn up, Susan had demanded a free hand. Quinney, slightly squirming, had accorded this. More; he remained in the small dining-room, trying to read the paper, and prickling with irritation because of an enforced inactivity.

"I've won a hundred pounds and a new hat," said Susan.

"Not a new hat, Susie."

"*And* a new hat," said Susan firmly. "That, Joe, is all I shall get, because I mean to give the hundred pounds to Mrs. Cookson."

"You're the limit! You're beyond the giddy horizon!"

"I thought, after what had happened, that you wouldn't want to keep Cookson here, and this climate is killing him. We may save his life by sending him to California."

"Save his life! I could put him up against a wall and shoot him with my own hand."

"You'd miss him, Joe; yes, you would. You ain't as fierce as you look, dear. Lark and Bundy made a Bolshy out of him. Now, just to show me that I really did marry the right man, you're going to make a good Christian of him. You're going to succeed where Lark and Bundy failed."

Quinney jumped out of his chair, and began to pace up and down the carpet, not a big one. Whenever he turned, he glared at Susan's artless countenance. She waited patiently, believing that his sense of humour would save the situation.

Suddenly, as she had expected, he burst into uncontrollable laughter. Then he seized her round her still trim waist, and kissed her.

"By gum! Susie, it does tickle me to death to think what a wicked woman you would have been if you hadn't married me!"

A Tug of War

I

MENTION has been made already of that eminent firm of dealers in antiques, Messrs. Lark and Bundy. Gustavus Lark, at whose soft white hands Quinney had experienced bludgeonings, retired from active business before the war. His son, who took his place, was—as Quinney put it—"badly modelled out of the same rotten paste."

During the régime of Gustavus—and it will be remembered by the few that the great man closely resembled an august personage—Mr. Bundy's more predatory instincts were kept in check. Gustavus robbed on the grand scale. He had bought from Quinney a commode with panels painted by Angelica Kauffmann for five hundred pounds and he had sold it to an American multi-millionaire for two thousand five hundred. Quinney never found this out till many years had passed. Gustavus Lark, with the help of an expert, the late Pressland, had convinced Quinney, then a young man, that the commode was a fine copy. Quinney had paid nine hundred for it. He lost a clear four hundred pounds over a misdeal, and, when he learned the truth, he swore to his faithful Susan that he would get even with Messrs. Lark and Bundy

—some day. It was not easy to get even or to get near such slippery customers. But Quinney became more sanguine after the retirement of Gustavus. Bundy, who could never be mistaken for a personage, cut capers upon thin ice. To change the metaphor, he sailed too near the reefs. The son of the great Gustavus had inherited his sire's moral obliquity without his caution and charm of manner. And, unhappily for the firm, the really big clients whom Gustavus treated with almost royal suavity and consideration were growing old. Many of them died. The younger collectors, more widely awake, displayed less confidence in Mr. Bundy. Accordingly it came to pass that Bundy fell back upon the commoner herd with whom it is much safer to deal dishonestly. Experts "vet" the purchases of rich collectors.

Quinney bided his time.

Sooner or later, so he believed, an All-just Providence would deliver Messrs. Lark and Bundy into his hand.

Susan said to him more than once:

"It isn't healthy, Joe, to cherish revengeful feelings."

To this Quinney replied cheerfully:

"God bless your dear heart! Bundy sent a Lark to me, and I mean to have a Lark with Bundy. He'll get the bird."

"It's touching pitch," said Susan.

The Cookson "affair" brought Messrs. Lark and Bundy to Quinney's particular notice. Cookson, almost staggering beneath the burden of coals of fire heaped upon his head by Susan, told Quinney a thing or two about the firm which sank into a reten-

tive memory. Quinney could not "use" such information, but it occurred to him that Cookson, had he been a real "wrong 'un," might have extorted blackmail from his former employers. Cookson sailed for California.

It may be mentioned here, incidentally, that after Posy's marriage, Susan, although losing a beloved daughter, gained the dearest wish of her heart. She and her Joe came together again in business. Susan was incapable of taking a sincere interest in "things" as opposed to "persons." She never bought or sold. But Quinney took her fully into his confidence. He talked business with her, and listened, occasionally, to shrewd advice. Susan realized, upliftingly, that her Joe had come back to her. He wanted her, just as she had always wanted him. After the war, indeed, she entered upon an Indian summer of happiness and contentment.

Quinney was never impatient with visitors who looked at his "stuff" and didn't buy. He regarded them as walking advertisements of his establishment. Courteously treated, they might send bona-fide buyers. And, all his life, he had thoroughly enjoyed talking about his gems, particularly to the young and nice-looking of the opposite sex.

One afternoon a prepossessing young lady drifted in. She flourished a note-book. In it she jotted down prices. Her interest in the Chippendale furniture was almost uncanny. Presently, Quinney began to suspect that she might be a dealer herself. But he decided that she didn't know enough. Her eager questions indicated ignorance of values. However, she bought one or two small "bits" without haggling.

It was inevitable, of course, that Quinney led her into the sanctuary.

In that Holy of Holies, the young lady explained herself with artless candour.

"I have been to several of the big antique shops," she said. She added after a pause: "I came on here from Lark and Bundy's."

"Lark and Bundy's," repeated Quinney.

"They are big people?" she queried lightly.

"Nobody quite like 'em," said Quinney.

"Old Mr. Bundy was very kind to me—quite fatherly."

"Ah! If you had met Mr. Gustavus Lark."

"I did meet young Mr. Lark. They ask a great deal of money for their best things."

"They ask a stiffish price," admitted Quinney. "They don't always get what they ask."

"But Mr. Bundy enlightened me about his methods of doing business. He told me that he only bought genuine bits; then he adds a reasonable profit, and sells them."

"Sometimes," admitted Quinney.

"Mr. Bundy," continued the young lady, "told me that his firm undertook valuations, inventories and so forth. He says that people ought to know the value of what they have."

"Quite," said Quinney. "It's surprisin' to me they don't. Nobody knows that better than old Mr. Bundy."

"I believe," said the young lady, "that I have some good things, but I know nothing, absolutely nothing, about them."

"Find out about 'em," said Quinney curtly.

"Yes; that is what I propose to do. Young Mr. Lark is coming down to my little place—I only came into it a short time ago—to look over what I have and advise me."

"Very kind and accommodating, I'm sure." He continued, with a quizzical glance at his visitor, "Did Mr. Bundy suggest your seeing me? No. I thought not. Why did you come on to me, madam?"

"I'd heard of you, Mr. Quinney. Lord Mel told me about you. Really, I wasn't coming on, but——"

She paused.

"But——" murmured Quinney, insinuatingly.

The young lady laughed.

"It's such a tiny thing, I hardly like to mention it, but, as I say, Mr. Bundy showed me his Chippendale. Then he was called away and Mr. Lark took his place. I had noticed particularly a Chippendale mirror, very quaint, and curiously like one belonging to me. Mr. Bundy had mentioned the price—forty-five guineas. Passing it again with Mr. Lark I stopped to look at it, to make quite sure that it was just like mine. Mr. Lark said that he could let me have it for thirty-five guineas—quite a difference, wasn't it?"

"Mistakes happen," observed Quinney. "All the same, we don't make such mistakes here. Lord Mel will tell you that. Are you thinking of selling any of your things?"

"I may have to," she sighed. "That is why I am trying to find out values."

This ingenuous confession raised a smile, but Quinney reflected that she had played the game. She had bought a couple of bits. And he liked her.

He distrusted the fatherly interest displayed by Mr. Bundy.

"Will you take a hint from me?" he asked bluntly. "Lord Mel has been a good friend of mine; he may be a friend of yours; I'm under great obligations to his lordship. I'd like to help any friend of his. I don't undertake valuations. I haven't the time. Young Mr. Lark knows values as well as any man in the trade. Let him value your things. Then I should like to see them and I should like, also, to see his valuation. My hint is this: don't sell one bit till I've had a squint at what you've got."

He spoke so earnestly that the young lady was visibly impressed.

"Thank you," she said pleasantly. "You are very kind. This is my card. You will hear from me later."

II

Quinney took the card to Susan. She adjusted her pince-nez and glanced at it.

"Lady Ann Frothersham, Prior's Caundle, Somerset."

"Yes," said Quinney. "I shall hear all about her from Lord Mel. If I'm not wrong in my reckonin', Susie, she's a lamb keepin' company with a wolf."

"Mercy me!" exclaimed Susan.

"Wolves, I should say, dear. Meanin'—Lark and Bundy."

"Well I never! You'll save her from them, Joe?"

Quinney sat down frowning. He seldom sat down till after closing time.

"It's my notion," he said slowly, "that Lark

and Bundy are on the rampage. They've taken up this valuation stunt lately. They find time for it. A lot of stuff is floating into the market. They see it before it reaches the market. They get hold of it. And these little deals are done on the quiet. The old families are hard hit by taxation and what not. Some of 'em have to raise money. So they sell a picture here and a cabinet there and nobody is much the wiser. See ? "

" Of course you told the young lady to have nothing to do with those hateful people."

" Of course I didn't, old dear. I want to catch 'em at their games. This young lady is my bait for 'em. I told her that Gussie Lark knew values, and so he does. I'm going to give that young man plenty of rope, and then he may hang himself."

He rose up, whistling cheerfully, and returned to his showrooms.

III

None the less, his natural optimism—not to mention his generosity in giving plenty of rope to Gussie Lark—was somewhat diminished on further reflection. All his instincts assured him that his enemies were up to mischief. But he couldn't divine what mischief it might be. Much perplexed, it occurred to his active mind that Tomlin, now in Bond Street, might enlighten him. Tomlin " kept in " with all the big dealers. Quinney disdained " knockouts " and " rings." He pursued the honest and even tenour of his way, a broad highway. Many dealers hated him, because he labelled superb reproductions as such, selling them as " honest fakes." Probably

him to run down to Prior's Caundle for the day. She offered to pay expenses and the proper fee.

Quinney had heard of Prior's Caundle. Lord Mel gave him exact information, but not much of it. The manor house and some land had been left to Lady Ann by an uncle. Lord Mel had never seen the place. But he believed it held good stuff. He was reasonably certain that the uncle, a hard-riding, port-drinking squire, knew nothing about porcelain, pictures or furniture. "And I expect," he added, "the niece knows as much."

A two-seater met Quinney at Nether Caundle, and he was whirled by Lady Ann, who drove her own car, through narrow lanes powdered with snow. Heavy clouds impended.

"It's freezing," said Lady Ann.

"And snowing," added Quinney.

Flakes were falling thickly before they reached the house. A staid butler opened the front door. Quinney beheld a roaring fire. Half frozen, he could think of nothing else. The butler relieved him of hat and overcoat. Lady Ann took her car to the garage.

"Can I offer you anything, sir, after your cold journey?"

"If you offer me a hot Scotch I won't refuse it."

Left for a minute alone, Quinney turned his back upon the fire and surveyed the hall. His first reflection was that he had come to Somerset on a fool's errand. The hall was full of rubbish. Good sporting prints hung upon the walls. A billiard table, covered with rugs and coats and newspapers, occupied half the floor space. A circular rack was full of cues

without tips. The easy chairs looked uneasy. Under the window was a long divan, upholstered in black horse-hair, upon a platform. Turning his warmed back upon these objects, Quinney beheld an eighteenth century clock upon the mantelpiece, and, flanking it, two Early Worcester vases. He whistled softly as he gazed at these.

Lady Ann bustled in. Quinney decided that she might be twenty-eight years old. She wore a shabby but well-cut jacket and skirt. The butler appeared at the same time with a steaming tumbler.

"Whilst you are sipping your drink," said Lady Ann, "I'll fetch Mr. Lark's valuation. We shall have luncheon in an hour."

She walked off briskly. Quinney polished his spectacles.

Within a minute several sheets of typescript were thrust into his hand.

"I shall be back in a jiffy," observed Lady Ann. "I breed Runner ducks, and they don't like snow."

Quinney sat down, warmed by the fire and the hot whisky, warmed, too, by a pleasant reception.

He skimmed through the long inventory. Obviously, there was good stuff in the manor house. And the valuer appeared, on the surface of things, to have done his duty. Quinney grunted, more puzzled than ever. Young Lark, for example, had set the right price upon the clock and the Early Worcester vases. But the price was slightly higher than any dealer would care to pay.

"Prohibitive," growled Quinney.

Lady Ann came back, shaking herself.

"It's snowing harder than ever," she remarked.

The leisurely tour of the house began. The drawing-room was charming, very little rubbish there; and Quinney said so.

"Mr. Lark suggested to me that my best bits ought to be together. He kindly helped me to arrange this room."

"Couldn't have done it better myself, my lady."

"I had no idea that I possessed such valuable things."

"They are not undervalued," said Quinney, tapping the typescript. "Did Mr. Lark offer to buy any of your porcelain at his own valuation?"

"No; he didn't. Indeed, he urged me not to sell. He begged me to regard my things as a lock-up. That was his word. But, unfortunately, regarded as a sound investment, they don't bring in income."

"And you don't pay income tax upon them, my lady."

They wandered on and on. Quinney paused to admire many objects, but amongst them was little really superlative. At the end of the tour, he returned the typescript to its owner, saying quietly:

"Mr. Lark seems to have made a thorough job of this."

Then they went in to luncheon.

During luncheon Lady Ann talked briskly of hunting and Runner ducks. Her predecessor, a maternal uncle, had been an ardent follower of the chase all his life. Quinney hazarded the conjecture that this gentleman had collected the sporting prints which hung in the hall and the passages.

"He had them framed," replied Lady Ann. "My

grandfather collected them. He was mad about prints. I have portfolios full of prints."

Quinney became instantly alert. Like the stag at Ronan's rill, he seemed to "snuff the tainted gale." Perhaps he had "hit the line of a wily fox" after all. Prints had been included, *en bloc*, in the inventory. But the framed Alkens and Rowlandsons were not so included. A stiffish valuation had been placed on them.

"Portfolios?" he echoed.

"Yes; but nothing of much value. Mr. Lark went through them with me."

"Do you know about prints, my lady?"

"Very little, Mr. Quinney. Dear me! It is coming down. What a storm!"

Presently, she left her guest to drink his coffee and smoke a cigar in the dining-room. She returned in ten minutes with a rueful face.

"My groom says we shall never get to the station. I'm afraid you are snow-bound for a few hours."

Quinney shrugged his shoulders, philosophically.

"You might be in a colder house," murmured Lady Ann.

He agreed cordially. And accordingly, by the sheer luck of things, a busy man was left alone with two large portfolios of prints which otherwise might have escaped notice. Within a few minutes he was chuckling and rubbing his hands. Then, systematically, he began to sort out the prints, arranging them in two sections. At tea-time his hostess found him still engrossed in his task and—as she put it afterwards—"running mute." At tea, she discoursed again upon hunting and Runner ducks.

"This place is remote," she admitted, "but from a hunting point of view well situated. As I shall have to give up hunting——"

"Give up hunting——?" repeated Quinney. He quite understood what such an abstention implied to such a woman. Lord Mel had told him about Lady Ann. She had lost a devoted lover in France. Her brother was the head of a much impoverished family. As a lord of many acres heavily mortgaged he had been hit cruelly hard by the war. Lord Mel, discreetly mentioning these facts to Quinney, had hinted that Prior's Caundle might compensate a charming young woman for many scourgings.

"I can only afford one hunter now," said Lady Ann, but she spoke without a trace of petulance, being obviously not a whiner.

Quinney nodded. Very abruptly, with a queer smile on his face, he said:

"I want to ask you some questions about your prints. Did you say that your grandfather had collected all of them?"

"Yes. I can remember my people laughing at him. He poked his nose into some strange places. My mother used to scold him for wasting his time and his money."

"Um!" growled Quinney. "You are quite sure that neither you nor your uncle added to the collection?"

"Absolutely sure."

Quinney chuckled.

"Why do you laugh, Mr. Quinney?"

"When did your grandfather die, my lady?"

"Let me see. He died when I was fifteen. I'm nearly thirty. Yes; fifteen years ago."

"That is interesting—and exciting, because I'm prepared to swear, on oath, if necessary, that some of your prints are reproductions made since your grandfather's death."

Lady Ann exhibited astonishment.

"But—it's impossible. Besides, for many years before his death, my grandfather bought no prints. He never left this house."

Quinney nodded solemnly. Lady Ann jumped up.

"Please show me these reproductions."

The prints lay upon a solid table at the end of the room. Quinney, assuming the authority of a field-marshal upon the eve of battle, raised his voice:

"The originals," he began, "are very valuable, portraits by Reynolds and Romney, engraved by such artists as the Smiths, Marchi, Dean and Thomas Watson. The photographic reproductions are wonderful. The forgeries of colour prints are to be found everywhere; some are difficult to detect; some are easy."

He tapped a small pile beneath his hand.

"How did these come here?"

"I—I don't know."

Quinney, now in his natural element, picked up a specimen and held forth. We need not repeat what he said. He made it perfectly plain to his hostess that a number of reproductions lay before her, and he concluded on the highest note:

"The originals—if they were here—would be worth some two or three thousand pounds."

"You affirm that I have been robbed, Mr. Quinney?"

"It looks uncommonly like it, madam."

V

Further talk brought other facts to light. The portfolios had been locked up during the uncle's tenure of Prior's Caundle. Humanly speaking, young Mr. Lark had been the first to see them during his first visit, and he had paid two visits. All the servants were old and trusted retainers, except the younger maids. It was unthinkable, as Quinney pointed out, that any ordinary thief could have stolen the originals and replaced them with copies. More, no ordinary thief would be able to dispose of rare mezzotints and colour prints. Later, just before dinner, a list of the engravings in the portfolio was taken out of an ancient brass-cornered desk. The missing originals were carefully enumerated in this tell-tale list.

"I think," said Quinney, "that we have him."

"Him?"

"Young Mr. Lark. Will you leave this delicate matter entirely in my hands, my lady."

"Very willingly, but——"

Quinney held up a finger.

"I'm never so happy as when I combine pleasure with business, madam. It will be real jam for me to stage-manage this little show-up. But I must have time to think things over. It isn't going to be easy. Let's say that the prints have disappeared. Where are they? Not a word to anybody. I have jotted down in my note-book the names. It is possible, of course, that your grandfather sold the originals, but who replaced them with reproductions made since his death? Master Lark. In his little

way, he's clever. It wouldn't surprise me to discover that this valuation stunt has kept him out of the Bankruptcy Court. He pleases his clients by slightly overvaluing their stuff. They speak of him kindly."

"Yes; I have."

"Quite! He poses to gentlepeople as a big dealer beyond suspicion. He invites confidence. He is left alone to rummage in odd corners. He encourages his clients to talk about themselves. He finds out quickly if they know the value of what they've got. Very few do. He buys a good bit here and there. Having overvalued the less rare stuff, his quiet bid is accepted unhesitatingly. And people like you, my lady, don't tell their neighbours about these little deals. Did Mr. Lark offer to buy any prints?"

"Yes; he did."

"And he offered what seemed to you a fair price, I dare say?"

"Oh, yes. I remember everything. He showed me a book giving prices of those prints in the hall. He offered to sell all my prints on commission."

"Very kind and thoughtful!"

"I refused because, somehow, I didn't like to sell what had been dear to my grandfather. And Mr. Lark told me that apart from the sporting prints I shouldn't get very much. I remember now that he suggested taking a few of them to London to be cleaned, but I didn't care to go to the expense.'

"An astute gentleman, very!"

"I thought him to be a capable and straightforward young man."

"He's slipped up on these reproductions. The cleverest knaves make just such little mistakes.

And I suppose he didn't know that you had a list ? "

" No ; I found the list only the other day."

" I think we have him," repeated Quinney, " and, if so, you needn't give up hunting, my lady."

" I shall leave this matter in your hands, Mr. Quinney."

VI

Quinney returned, next day, to his Susan. Rain fell at midnight and melted the snow. But the two-seater skidded more than once on its journey to the station. Quinney remarked facetiously :

" I wouldn't trust young Mr. Lark to drive me, my lady."

Upon arrival at his own house, he rang up the private detective of whom mention has been made in a previous narrative, Mr. John Williams, whose plastic face disdained the baser uses of " make-up." To Mr. Williams certain reproductions of Reynolds and Romney portraits were shown. An original was placed beside them. Having received further instructions Mr. Williams went his way. Shortly afterwards, an elderly gentleman called in Soho Square and asked to see the proprietor. Quinney appeared. The elderly gentleman exasperated the dealer almost beyond endurance, adopting a querulous tone and manner, crabbing good stuff, sniffing contemptuously at fair prices.

" Of course you know me, Mr. Quinney ? "

" I don't," said Quinney curtly.

" I'm Williams."

Quinney shouted with laughter. He had feared,

not without reason, that Mr. John Williams might be known to Messrs. Lark and Bundy.

Two days later, Mr. Williams reported progress. In the possession of Messrs. Lark and Bundy were certain mezzotints and prints in colour held firmly at a price. A memorandum in young Mr. Lark's handwriting set forth the names of these prints and the price demanded for them. Another paper in the same handwriting set forth the fact that by payment, herewith acknowledged, of a certain sum, Mr. Ozias Bamberger, of Cincinnati, Ohio, had the right to exercise for one calendar month the option to purchase the said prints at the price agreed upon by both parties. To establish confidence, Mr. Williams, masquerading as Mr. Bamberger, had bought one print from Messrs. Lark and Bundy. Quinney looked lovingly at that print.

"It would have fetched more at auction, John, but they ain't selling these prints in public places."

Mr. Williams smiled and withdrew.

VII

After his retirement from active business, Mr. Gustavus Lark settled down in Sussex upon a property of some size and pretension. He became an ornament of the Bench of Magistrates and dispensed a gracious hospitality. Beholding him on the Bench or at the head of his table, the most captious critic would have acclaimed him as a fine specimen of the English country gentleman, still hale and hearty, although past the Psalmist's allotted span of years.

He exhibited surprise when his butler told him

that Mr. Joseph Quinney wished to see him. But he supposed, naturally enough, that Quinney happened to be in the neighbourhood and wished to pay his respects to a great man.

"I will see Mr. Quinney. Bring some whisky and the Calixto Lopez cigars."

A minute later Quinney was ushered into the presence.

"I am delighted to see you," murmured Mr. Lark.

"Thank you," replied Quinney briskly. "Snug crib you have here, Mr. Lark."

Gustavus raised a supercilious eyebrow. He would not have so described *The Towers* himself, but a seeker of the right phrase makes kind allowance for the disabilities of others. He smiled blandly:

"I am happy in my home, Mr. Quinney."

The butler appeared with the refreshments. Quinney declined whisky and a cigar.

"Never drink or smoke much in business hours," he declared.

"Really? But, surely, you have not come to see me on business? I'm out of business, my dear sir."

"But you've an interest in the old firm, Mr. Lark?"

"Yes; yes—an interest. I get my dividends, and the rest no longer concerns me."

He waved his white hand superbly.

For a minute or two Quinney dissembled. He felt like a cat, and Gustavus reminded him of a sleek, white rat.

"We miss you, Mr. Lark; we do indeed."

"Ah, well, it's good of you to say that. Every dog has his day; I have had mine. I worked hard,

as you know. On that account I can enjoy more appreciably my leisure."

Quinney divined from his manner that outsiders were not invited to disturb that leisure. He said respectfully :

" I should not presume, Mr. Lark, to intrude except upon a matter of urgent private importance."

Again Mr. Lark raised an eyebrow.

" Have you ever heard of Prior's Caundle ? "

" Never."

He spoke with finality.

" Do you know Lady Ann Frothersham ? "

" I was not even aware that she exists."

Quinney bowed, almost meekly. He was positive that Gustavus spoke truth. So much the better.

" Lady Ann Frothersham, who lives at Prior's Caundle, has been robbed of some rare and valuable prints."

" Indeed ? "

" Yes ; and the job was cleverly done. Lady Ann is not an expert on prints. She knows all that there is to be known about Runner ducks. She inherited two portfolios of prints. The thief, guessing, possibly, that there might be a list of the prints, substituted reproductions for some originals. You and I, Mr. Lark, know that this little game has been played before."

Mr. Lark smiled. He had begun life as a " rapper," and it was said of him (by Tomlin and others) that in his eager youth he had substituted a false set of " London Cries " for the originals which he had discovered in a cottage. Quinney went on :

" The portfolios have been locked up at Prior's

Caundle for many years. The reproductions have been executed quite recently."

He paused. Mr. Lark murmured placidly:

"In what way does this concern me, Mr. Quinney?"

"One man," said Quinney quietly, "has had access to these portfolios. He valued everything in the old manor house. When I heard his name I wondered why he undertook such valuations."

Mr. Lark winced. But his voice was silky as he observed:

"You think, Mr. Quinney, that this valuer stole the rare prints and substituted fakes?"

"I have proved that up to the hilt, Mr. Lark. The missing prints are in the hands of some big dealers. An American customer—a friend of mine—has an option of purchase on them. One he has already acquired. In the corner of this particular print is an incised mark, hardly visible, the mark used by the original collector. Now, sir, I come to you to ask what I ought to do."

"Ah! The firm you mention may have bought the prints in good faith."

"Unhappily, the young man who valued everything at Prior's Caundle, is a member of the firm in question."

"You don't say so. And what—what is your particular interest in this regrettable affair?"

"I am acting for Lady Ann Frothersham."

"She has instructed you to prosecute?"

"Not yet. The whole matter is unreservedly in my hands."

"You—you have approached the young man?"

"I preferred to approach his—father."

Quinney expected some violence of ejaculation.

Mr. Lark remained monumentally impassive. He appeared to be thinking furiously—and he was.

"I approached the father first, Mr. Lark, because, long ago, he offered to pull me out of a tight place. I had paid nine hundred pounds for a commode with panels reputed to be painted by Angelica Kauffmann. The father of this young man, an expert, told me that I had been had. He took the faked bit off my hands for five hundred pounds. It was worth that as a period piece."

Mr. Lark remained silent. He glanced searchingly at Quinney's inscrutable countenance.

"What," said Quinney softly, "do you advise me to do, Mr. Lark?"

A truly great man shows his quality in emergencies and exigencies. Gustavus Lark had something of the superb *charlatanerie* which distinguished Claude Duval. He had robbed like a monarch, never forgetting that, physically, he resembled one. A lesser man might have blustered.

"If it is really as you affirm, Mr. Quinney, the prints might be restored to their owner quietly, without publicity."

"Yes; but this option on them?"

"That, I admit, introduces complications. Speaking personally, I deprecate public washing of dirty linen. I am assuming, you will observe, that the linen is dirty."

"Filthy," said Quinney.

"You have approached the—the father of this young man because—because——?"

"Because I owed him something. I'd sooner settle with him. And he's a rich man. And a man of

position. If I know him, he would pay through his handsome nose to avert a scandal."

Gustavus nodded.

"You are wise, my dear Quinney, to keep even names out of this. And I commend your discretion in coming to me. What sum, in your opinion, ought the father be called upon to pay?"

As he spoke his voice sank to a whisper.

"The American, Mr. Ozias Bamberger, is getting them too cheap. I couldn't advise Lady Ann to take less than twenty-five hundred guineas. Bamberger is paying the same number of pounds."

"Twenty-five hundred guineas," repeated Gustavus.

"And, in addition, Mr. Lark, if the matter is to go no farther, there should be four hundred pounds, plus interest at five per cent, compounded for eighteen years, coming to me."

Mr. Lark, for the first time, betrayed excitement.

"What are you saying?"

"Call it a thousand pounds, Mr. Lark, not guineas. I'm no pincher. The father of that young man sold the commode for two thousand five hundred pounds. A rummy bit of coincidence, isn't it? I've waited eighteen years, Mr. Lark."

Gustavus rose with dignity. He walked to a table where his butler had placed the tray, and poured himself out a tot of whisky with a steady hand. Then he turned to Quinney.

"You exact your pound of flesh?"

"But I don't make it a guinea. And I might, Mr. Lark."

"You will hear from me," said Gustavus. "I wish you good-day, Mr. Quinney."

VIII

What passed between Gustavus Lark and his son, not to mention old Mr. Bundy, will be never known. Quinney received two cheques: one for twenty-five hundred guineas, and another for a thousand pounds. Lady Ann accepted gladly the bigger cheque, and bought two more hunters forthwith, which she named Lark and Bundy. She offered a very handsome commission to Quinney, who smiled as he refused it.

"I have," he said, "settled in full with old Mr. Lark over another matter. As I told you, my lady, this has been a combination for me of pleasure and business."

Susan, you may be sure, had a share of the loot. Her Joe doesn't know, or care, whether or not he compounded a felony.

A Counterfeit Presentment

I

THE Marquess of Mel had been the friend and patron of Joe Quinney for more years than either cared to reckon. Lord Mel was the elder of the two, and Quinney had noticed with sorrow that since the War the troubles and anxieties that beset great landowners had left lines upon his friend's kind face. He was ageing prematurely.

One morning, Lord Mel sent for Quinney and received him in the library of his town house. Quinney glanced with shining eyes at the familiar treasures, the pictures by Dutch masters.

"Sit down, my dear fellow."

A note of nervousness in Lord Mel's courteous voice challenged Joe's attention. And his host, contrary to custom, began to pace up and down the great room, pausing, now and again, to lift a thin finger.

"Joe, I'm desperately driven. I hoped to hand over intact to my son what I inherited from my father, but it cannot be—it cannot be. He knows that as well as I do. Well, something must go."

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" sighed Quinney.

"The problem resolves itself into one word—WHAT?"

Quinney glanced apprehensively at everything in the beautiful room.

" My lady's best rope of pearls has gone."

Quinney nodded mournfully. He knew where they had gone—to repose upon the ample bosom of Mrs. Abraham Guggenheimer.

" I have decided, Joe, to sell the Van Eyck."

Quinney groaned. The picture hung above the mantelpiece. It represented the Virgin and an adoring worshipper. A somewhat similar example of Jan Van Eyck is one of the glories of the Louvre. The incomparable freshness and brilliancy of the colouring set time at defiance. Even Quinney, with all his experience, might have thought that it was painted recently had he not known better. The father of oil-painting made and used lasting pigments.

" It ain't going to America, my lord ? "

" I fear there is no other market. However, I didn't send for you to argue about that. I want it copied. There is a man at The Hague, who is a marvel. You can copy the original frame. And, under thick glass, there will remain to me an—illusion, a mirage."

Lord Mel turned his back upon Quinney and blew his nose. Quinney blew his, whereupon my lord laughed.

" You feel this as I do, my old friend."

Tears were in Quinney's eyes, as he bowed his head. Lord Mel continued calmly :

" I have sent for Maartens, the copyist. But I can't stick the idea of seeing him at work here. There's a limit to everything. And we don't want the fact of selling the picture to leak out till it is sold. There

will be the usual howl of protestation from the crowd who wouldn't subscribe sixpence to prevent a masterpiece leaving this country. The Nation—so I'm privately advised—can't afford to buy it."

"Damn the War," ejaculated Quinney.

"It has occurred to me that you have, probably, some attic at the top of your house where Maartens could copy the picture without a soul, except ourselves, being the wiser. Maartens is to be trusted. Whilst he is copying the picture you will copy the frame. What say you?"

"Your lordship can rely on me. I have the very attic for the purpose. It has been so used before."

"Good! My servants and friends will think that an old picture is being cleaned or exhibited elsewhere. But in any case I am leaving town for the country. By the time I return the work will be done."

"Yes, my lord."

II

Quinney superintended the removal of the Van Eyck to Soho Square, and he managed so cunningly that not a soul, except his wife, Susan, was the wiser. The picture was smaller than a kit-cat. Lord Mel and Quinney took it down. Quinney covered it with sacking, carried it into a taxi, and hid it in the attic after his workmen had finished work for the day. A new lock was placed upon the attic door, with two keys to it.

Mr. Jan Maartens presented himself at Soho Square.

Quinney eyed him with that wrinkled interrogation which first sight of any foreigner provokes in an

honest Englishman. But Maartens looked what he was, the simplest and most guileless of men. He had spent his life copying Van Eyck and Memling, and had acquired a skill and technique positively uncanny. He showed Quinney a prepared panel.

"Not mahogany," said Joe.

Maartens smiled.

"Die same as what Van Eyck use. My secret."

Quinney learned that he made his own pigments, grinding them himself even as the brothers Van Eyck had done more than five hundred years ago. He mixed with these colours an amber varnish. He had oddly shaped irons which, when heated to the right temperature, swiftly dried his pigments. He assured Quinney that, under a strong lens, his brush-work was almost the same as the Master's. Joe was tremendously impressed. He told Susan that Maartens might have stepped out of an old Dutch picture. He wore a black cape and a black hat that suggested the seventeenth century. His carefully trimmed, white beard, his long white hair, framed features which might have belonged to Erasmus. In him Joe Quinney acclaimed a kindred spirit. Maartens had never met Lord Mel, and yet, even as Quinney, he resented the cruel necessity that constrained a great nobleman to sell a masterpiece. And it was terrible to Maartens that the original was going to America.

Between these two enthusiasts a friendly rivalry established itself. Maartens, no more modest than Quinney concerning his own aptitudes, declared that he intended to reproduce the masterpiece so perfectly that few indeed would detect the difference between

old and new. Quinney, for his part, was equally confident that his chosen workmen would be as successful in copying the ancient frame.

Each went to work joyously.

Somewhat to Quinney's surprise, Mr. Maartens "made a hit" with Susan. His courtesy, his gentle voice, his old-world face captivated Mrs. Quinney. He talked to her whilst he worked. She learned from him that he was a lonely old man. His wife and children were dead.

"I like him ever so much," she told Quinney. "Heart, Joe, is a bigger thing than Art."

"That's what I thought when I married you, old dear."

Such remarks never failed to soften Susan, but she remained obstinately of the opinion that thirty thousand pounds for a mere picture was a wicked and preposterous price. That happened to be the precise sum which Lord Mel hoped to get for his most cherished possession.

The frame was finished first and compared with the original frame in the attic. Maartens congratulated Quinney. Quinney, quite as sincerely, congratulated Maartens.

And then, a fly obtruded itself into the ointment of their common satisfaction. Maartens said, nervously:

"I lose my key yesterday, Mr. Quinnee."

"What about it?"

"I stay at a hotel near Covent Garden. Gott! what a garden! But my compatriots go dere, ya. May-be I am known to some of dem."

"What are you getting at, old chap?"

"Well," he stared nervously at Quinney through his horn-rimmed spectacles. "You see, my friend, some bad fellow, hein? might guess dat Jan Maartens has left his country, which he loves, to—to make a copy of some great picture."

"Um! Yes—it's barely possible."

"To-day and yesterday somebody, so I think, follow me here."

"But your key. Are you speaking of the key to this attic?" Maartens nodded. "You mislaid it?"

"No, no. I am careful. I had hurried out to buy some flowers. I hurry back. No key! I go later to my dinner. I come back to my bedroom, and dere is die key. Queer, you say?"

"Nobody can know what we're up to."

Maartens shrugged a deprecating pair of shoulders.

Quinney went to his sanctuary and heartened himself up with a glass of brown sherry. He had suggested to his patron the propriety of insuring the Van Eyck against the ubiquitous burglar, but Lord Mel preferred, so he said, to run a negligible risk of robbery rather than provoke curiosity and importunity. Quinney, after protesting, acquiesced.

The brown sherry allayed uneasiness. Famous pictures, notably that of Her Grace of Devonshire, have been stolen, but what thief can get rid of them? In what millionaire's gallery can they hang undetected?

After Maartens had gone, Quinney surveyed the attic with alert eyes. It could be entered through the door or through the window. The smallest of sweeps couldn't squeeze down the chimney. The stairs leading to it passed Quinney's bedroom.

Quinney looked out of window upon steeply sloping roofs, safely scaled by cats only. A burglar, entering by the window, would have to carry with him a ladder, which he would ascend at imminent risk of breaking his neck.

"No need to worry," muttered Quinney.

It occurred to him, also, that Mynheer Maartens might be followed by anybody. Apart from his mediæval cape and hat, he could hardly—as a "Beaver"—hope to escape notice.

Other matters engrossed his attention.

III

Lord Mel saw the copy two days after it was finished. He came up from Melshire for that purpose. The original was lightly glazed, but Maartens had bought a sheet of thick plate glass to give "tone" to the copy. Each picture was placed in its own frame, on an easel, in front of the window which faced north.

Lord Mel knew, of course, his own picture, but he admitted that he was astounded, as well he might be, at the counterfeit presentment. He went further than this. He maintained that the copy, had it been hung in its accustomed place, might have been accepted by him, the owner, as the original. Maartens beamed at him. It was settled that the original should be taken back to the library next day. The copy would remain in Quinney's attic till it was wanted. Lord Mel told his two craftsmen that the picture was sold. The London agent, who had negotiated the sale, was coming to Lord Mel's house to

take away the picture. Before he left the attic, Lord Mel wrote out a cheque for Maartens, guineas instead of pounds, and he presented the copyist, at the same time, with his own gold pencil-case as a mark of gratitude. Maartens was much touched. Indeed, after Mel had hurried away, the Dutchman shook his fist in the unseen face of the unknown purchaser; he cursed him in double Dutch; he commended the Italian law which prohibits the exportation of works of art.

"Steady on, old chap," said Quinney. "We can't have it both ways, can we?"

Jan Maartens wiped tears of indignation from his eyes. When Quinney was summoned below he left an unhappy man huddled up in a chair, glaring at the original, muttering inarticulate curses in his own strange tongue.

Next morning, Quinney took back the Van Eyck to Mel House. He said afterwards that he had not stomach to look at it. Lord Mel may have experienced the same heart-burning. He returned to Melshire, after instructing Quinney to introduce Maartens to his steward. He wished Maartens to overhaul other Dutch pictures which needed attention. Maartens accepted a job after his own heart. It was arranged between Quinney and the steward that Maartens should work in the library between the hours of ten and four.

IV

Three days later, during the afternoon of Wednesday, Quinney found the copy missing. He had seen it at midday. It had been taken out of the frame.

The same evening the Press published a garbled version of the robbery. The world was told that a Van Eyck had been stolen, and for twenty-four hours circumstantial evidence pointed to Maartens as the thief. He had been seen by Quinney's hall porter leaving the Soho Square establishment. He had come at one-fifteen when Quinney's workmen were at dinner. He had passed through the shop, as usual, ascended to the attic, let himself in, presumably with his own key, and passed out again.

This information was gleaned by the police, who, much to Susan's indignation, invaded Quinney's premises, asking questions of all and sundry. Joe told an inspector that a copy had been stolen, doubtless in mistake for the original. It was ridiculous to suppose that Maartens would steal his own copy. More, Quinney learned from Lord Mel's steward that Maartens had been working from ten to four in the library. At the very hour when the copy was stolen the steward had taken some luncheon to the Dutchman. The thief, after obtaining an impression of the attic key, had cleverly impersonated the old man. Maartens was quite willing to make another copy. The police left Soho Square and retreated to Maarten's hotel in Covent Garden. Next day, all London roared with laughter over the blunder perpetrated by a burglar who didn't know the moon from cream cheese.

Meanwhile the question of painting another copy grew vexed. The Van Eyck had been taken from Mel House.

It was boxed and ready for shipment to New York. Lord Mel, much excited, rushed up to town. Cables

flashed between London and New York. Finally, the purchaser of the Van Eyck graciously accorded his consent to another copy being made, provided extraordinary precautions against further robbery were exercised. The Van Eyck was to remain in the London agent's possession.

Maartens sent to the Hague for another panel.

Within a week, the enterprising agent had placed the Van Eyck on public view. Thousands paid a shilling to see it.

And then Quinney received the shock of his life. Lord Mel came to him late in the afternoon. Quinney received his patron in the sanctuary. He noticed that his lordship was agitated.

"Joe——?"

"My lord——?"

"I have paid a shilling to see my own picture. It isn't *mine*. It's the copy. The thief collared the real Van Eyck."

Quinney came within an ace of fainting. His knees were as wax; his hands trembled; the world, as he knew it, seemed to be disintegrating.

"We must pull ourselves together, Joe. There's a humorous side to this. The experts have been spoofed! A triumph of the preconceived idea. They saw what they expected to see—a Van Eyck that has been in my family for generations. It's true they can't get close to the picture; they can't examine the back of it; and it's in the genuine frame. Now—what do you say?"

Quinney was beyond speech. Lord Mel continued lightly:

"This looks like a case for Scotland Yard, but I

haven't been there, simply because I have a warm regard for Maartens and a sincere affection for you, old fellow. The Yard would suspect both of you."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Quinney.

He lay back in his chair, frowning and thinking.

As before, when confronted by a serious emergency, fighting instincts asserted themselves. And he could see himself as an object of suspicion with clearest detachment. Both pictures had been in his possession. Maartens and he alone had access to them. Maartens had established an alibi.

Joe laughed, relieving the tension.

"By gum! my lord, I'm up against it."

"So am I."

"Scotland Yard," said Lord Mel slily, "is quite capable of thinking that you and I, Joe, are in collusion."

And at that my lord laughed.

"Dead game sportsman, you are," said Quinney, quite forgetting that he was addressing a marquess.

"Thanks, Joe, but what are we going to do? Somebody may spot the copy. Somebody may smell fresh paint. There would be a rare hullabaloo. Anyway, I can't keep silent long. Meanwhile the thief believes that he has stolen the copy."

"I wonder!"

"You question that?"

"A dirty dog must be the tool and accomplice of a big knave. The big knave has the picture, frameless. I'm afraid that he has smelt old paint. And he's had a week's start. The police have treated this as a joke."

Lord Mel nodded.

"Have you told Maartens, my lord?"

"No—he's unhappy enough as it is."

Presently Lord Mel went away, but not to Scotland Yard.

V

That night, after supper, Susan, the faithful consort of thirty years, divined that something lay heavy upon her lord's masterful mind. When Quinney lit a second cigar, having smoked the first feverishly fast, she said tenderly:

"You're not fretting over that stolen copy, are you?"

"Yes; I am. I'd give fifty pounds to know where it is."

"The Dutchman took it."

Susan's intuitions had confounded Quinney more than once during their married life. He removed his cigar from his mouth and stared at her face, still pretty and beguiling.

"You come off it," he growled. "A man can't be in two places at the same time, Mrs. Smarty."

"He took it," persisted Susan, "because he's like you, in love with things. Worshipper of painted images! Who else would want to steal a copy? What beats me is, *why* didn't he take the original?"

"Ho!" said Quinney, sitting bolt upright.

"I caught him on his knees in front of it. Idolatry!"

"What? You never told me."

"Do you tell me everything, as you used to, Joe? Not you. I say—he took it. Why? Because nobody else could have taken it."

"What price alibis, old dear?"

Susan retorted smartly:

"I never believed in his alibi. From the first I knew that he was wrong in the head, poor old man. And I don't tell all I know to prying policemen."

"Lord love a duck! what *do* you know that you haven't told your hubby?"

"I didn't want to get poor Mr. Maartens into trouble. Why are you so excited, Joe?"

"Excited——? Lord save us! You carry on!"

"I saw him."

"You saw the thief in white chin-fittings that rigged himself up to look like him."

"I trust my eyes *and ears.*"

"And ears, hay?"

Susan ended triumphantly:

"I know his funny dot-and-carry-one step on the attic stairs as well as I know yours. I know his nervous little cough. I know the way he opens and shuts a door. Mr. Maartens was in the attic for just ten minutes, between one and two, last Wednesday week, him and nobody else."

"You *are* the limit," gasped Joe.

Susan surveyed him placidly.

"If he hadn't the right to take away his own copy, who has?"

"His copy?" shouted Quinney. "Lord Mel paid him one hundred guineas for that copy. It belongs to his lordship."

"What of it?"

"What of it? A man steals something belonging to another man, and you sit there darning my socks and ask—what of it?"

"I'm not one to impute evil," said Susan hastily. "If Mr. Maartens stole that copy he did it for a good reason."

By this time Quinney was hopping about the room, beside himself with excitement.

"Good reason," he howled. "You sit tight, Mrs. Compound-a-felony. Your friend, Mr. Maartens, didn't steal the copy; he stole the original—value *thirty thousand pounds.*"

"Well, I never," said Susan.

"What price Mr. Jan Maartens now?"

Susan replied demurely:

"I still think he's a very nice old gentleman—wrong in the head, like all who set their affections on sticks and stones."

Quinney laughed. Perhaps what kept love for Susan ripe and mellow was her gift for exciting laughter.

"All right, Susie, but Lord Mel stands to lose thirty thou., and I——"

For the first time Susan betrayed real anxiety.

"Lor', Joe; this doesn't affect you."

"My reputation is on the scrap heap, dearie."

"But I know where the picture is."

"You tell me you *know* where it is?"

"I know where it must be."

"Where, Mrs. Sherlock Holmes?"

"In the attic."

"Gizzards and geysers! How do you know?"

"Because he had nothing in his hand when he came out of the attic. I was peeking through the door. Where are you off to, Joe."

"Bless my stars! To the attic, of course. You traipse along, too."

VI

As he raced up steep stairs to the attic, followed by Susan, Quinney remembered that, so far as he knew, Maartens had not been to Soho Square since the theft—if he had come then. His work at Mel House engrossed him. But he had left in the attic, with Quinney's permission, the paraphernalia of a painter—an easel, the colours he ground himself, the siccative oils and resins which the great Van Eyck had discovered, a much stained smock of brown holland and an ancient overcoat. At these objects Quinney stared impatiently.

Then a search began and ended—*pro tem.*

"It ain't here," snapped Quinney.

"Must be," repeated Susan.

By this time Quinney had peered up the small chimney, looked under a strip of carpet and into an empty cupboard. He opened the window and glanced along the lead gutter. He stamped on the bare boards, glaring at Susan, now truly terrified because it occurred to her that Joe might have to pay Lord Mel thirty thousand pounds!

"Not here, old 'ooman!"

"Must be," repeated Susan for the third time.

Crawling along the floor, nose in dust, Quinney examined each solid plank in turn, whereat Susan observed derisively:

"He was only here ten minutes. You couldn't budge one of those planks in an hour."

Quinney rose from his knees, snorted, and glanced at a smoke-begrimed plaster ceiling.

"Couldn't reach that without a step-ladder, could he?" murmured Mrs. Quinney.

The walls were bare. But at the farther end of the garret were two ancient oil paintings, portraits of Georgian ladies, shocking daubs, bought by Quinney because the frames were of wood. The ladies seemed to be simpering derisively at Quinney. Already he had looked behind them, but not at them.

Suddenly, he remembered that he had given one of these pictures to Maartens, because the old gentleman had fancied the frame. Maartens had offered to buy it; he had been insistent about it. Why? For days he had not noticed either daub or frame. And—was this mere coincidence?—Maartens had offered to buy the picture after the incident of losing the key, after he had "planted," so to speak, in Quinney's mind the disturbing possibility of some rascal unduly interested in Mr. Jan Maartens' visit to England.

Quinney, like a hound that hits the line, darted at the picture. He gave tongue.

"By gum!"

The back of the canvas was not visible. A careful Dutchman had pasted a sheet of brown paper up to the edges of the stretcher.

"Who—whoop!"

He tore off the brown paper and held aloft the Van Eyck panel. It had been lying loose and snug between canvas and paper.

Quinney dropped the Van Eyck, hugged Susan, and waltzed her round the attic.

"Joe—*stop!*"

"Ain't going to stop."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she panted. "Think of Lord Mel! Is he dancing?"

Joe stopped.

"Gosh! You're right. You nip down to the 'phone. Gerrard, 096. Ask for his lordship. Say——! Wait a mo. Wait! Yes, yes. Tell him the lost is found——"

"The lost is f-f-found," repeated Susan, breathlessly.

"Tell him to step up here instanter."

Susan protested.

"Speak to his lordship as if he were you——? Not me."

"Talk to him as if he was King George, old dear."

He pushed her towards the door. As she flitted out, nimbly enough, Joe turned, picked up the Van Eyck, and stared at the frame he had copied so successfully.

VII

Next morning, at ten punctually, Mr. Jan Maartens entered Mel House. He glanced, as usual, at the big Rubens on the grand staircase as he removed his hat. Would Rubens have achieved such fame as a colourist if the brothers Van Eyck had never been born?

The house-steward showed him into the library and left him.

Maartens, as if he were in the chancel of a cathedral, moved softly and reverently across the thick carpet. He failed to notice that the big double doors at the north end of the room were not closed. Opposite to them was the chimney-piece above which had hung the Van Eyck. Fronting Maartens were tall windows.

He stood still, as if palsied. With a tremendous effort, he staggered towards the chimney-piece, holding out his trembling hands. He could see nothing except the Van Eyck; he could hear nothing, except, possibly, the beating of his own heart. He fell on his knees before the picture.

The double doors opened. Lord Mel tip-toed across the carpet, followed by Quinney. Lord Mel placed his frail hand upon the shoulder of the stricken man.

"Well, Maartens——?"

Maartens collapsed. For many minutes he was unable to speak. When he did speak, slowly and haltingly, he was barely articulate. But Quinney, two hours later, transposed into nervous English the sum and substance of what was said for the benefit of Susan.

"The old gentleman *is* daffy. You were right about that, Susie. He's potty about his own work; and he's a raving lunatic when it comes to Van Eyck and Memling. He believed that his copy would spoof everybody, and, by gum, it has. He couldn't stick the idea of that picture leaving Europe. He intended to pass the rest of his life gloating over it in secret. At his death, the truth would have been told, and everybody would admit that the work of

Jan Maartens had been accepted by the world as the work of Jan Van Eyck."

"And the alibi?"

"He worked that to rights. His lunch was brought to him by the steward, who went downstairs for his own lunch. Maartens nipped out of the front door, leaving it ajar. He took a taxi to Soho Square. He had a roll of brown paper and a pot of gum. He did the trick and was back in the library without being missed. He rang the bell for the steward to take away the lunch at a quarter to two. And asked him the time o' day. I couldn't have done the thing neater myself. That's all."

"All," repeated Susan scornfully. "I'm a deal more interested in the old gentleman than I am in that ancient picture. This is another warning to you, Joe. There are *things*, THINGS, in the National collections that you'd steal, if you were quite certain you wouldn't be found out."

"Susie——!"

"So, don't you throw stones at pore Mr. Maartens. Is—is he going to gaol?"

"Against public expediency, dearie," said Joe, quoting Lord Mel.

"Talk plain English, Joe."

"Mr. Maartens will go to—The Hague. Lord Mel and that tomfool who has been exhibiting a fake will exchange panels, not frames, on the strict Q.T."

"And my fifty pounds?"

"Your fifty pounds——?"

"You said you would give fifty pounds to anybody

who told you where the picture was. *I told you.* I shan't spend the money on things, Joe; I shall give it to my Waifs and Strays."

"What an old darling you are," said Quinney.

The Jade Bouddha

I

JOE QUINNEY bought it at a West Country sale, and chuckled to himself because he was the only London dealer present. The Bouddha was small, hideously ugly, and not fashioned out of the best jade. But it happened to be enshrined in a miniature cabinet of supreme craftsmanship, yellow lac, in perfect condition, early Chinese.

He was gloating over his bargain, when a lady in mourning approached him, whom he recognized as the late possessor of the Bouddha.

"You are Mr. Quinney?"

"Yes, madam."

"You bought a Bouddha in a lacquer shrine?"

"I did."

The lady hesitated. Quinney supposed that she wished, possibly, to buy the Bouddha back from him, and, glancing at her sad, pale face, he decided that he would accept a small profit if his supposition proved correct. He felt sorry for her, because a local dealer had just told him that she had been left a widow under tragic circumstances. Her husband, some six months before, had committed suicide. At the inquest, however, it had been shown that shell-

shock and a severe head wound accounted adequately for the rash act.

"I want to tell you something about the Bouddha."

"You know its history, madam? That adds to its value."

"I know nothing about it—except this: I believe it to be an accursed thing."

Quinney confessed, afterwards, to Mrs. Quinney that he was tremendously impressed, and more by the tone of the lady's voice than by her words. She continued less vehemently:

"Keep it in the shrine. If you sell it, tell the purchaser not to touch it, or at any rate not to hold it. I—I wish I had destroyed it, Mr. Quinney, but my late husband's executors insisted upon the hateful thing being sold. They—they laughed at me."

Quinney said bluntly:

"It has fetched five and twenty pounds, ma'am." He closed his lips, but curiosity opened them. "What does it do?" he asked.

"It works evil. I am sure of it. I—I can't say more."

Quinney carried the Bouddha back to London, and the nearer he got to his own sanctuary the less credence he placed in the lady's strange affirmation. He had heard similar stories before about mummies and other objects found in ancient tombs. But such stories were never verified. At any rate, not to his satisfaction. Nevertheless, he placed the shrine in his sanctuary, and never mentioned it to Susan, his wife, being quite sure that she would urge him to get rid of it at once.

Day after day, he looked at the tiny lacquer cabinet,

admiring its colour and lustre, but not opening it. At the end of a week, he told himself that he was a credulous ass.

"I'll look at the dam thing, and hold it in my hands, and see what happens, by gum!"

He opened the shrine. Squatting in the middle of it, leering hideously, was the Bouddha. For an instant Quinney felt affronted, as if a dwarf had stuck out a tongue at him. But his native obstinacy and pluck prevailed. He grasped the Bouddha firmly, sat down in a chair, and examined it. Careful inspection fortified his conviction that the jade was of poor quality and the image crudely fashioned by some inferior craftsman. The god, in fine, hardly deserved so superb a shrine. This thought percolated through his mind, as he lay back in his chair, eyeing disdainfully the leering monster.

"Sinfully ugly," he muttered. "And cold as ice."

He sat down again. There are very few persons who have seen Joe Quinney sit down during business hours. And he had much to challenge his attention, letters of importance to be answered.

Sitting quietly in his chair an odd experience overwhelmed him. The sun happened to be shining through the Georgian windows, but, suddenly, the lovely room, his pride and joy, grew dark and drear. He felt intensely miserable, limp, invertebrate. Involuntarily he closed his eyes. And, instantly, an astounding conviction assailed him that it would be well for him if he never opened them again. At the same moment a subtile odour titillated his nostrils. The odour soon became offensive, degenerating into

a—smell! It was an odd, penetrating stench, which, presently, brought to mind and memory a Chinese slum not far from the Mile End Road into which once he had wandered with another dealer. Half-suffocated, dazed, he sprang to his feet, dropping the Bouddha, and rushed to the window. Flinging up the lower sash, he leaned out, greedily inhaling the fresh air, looking down into the quiet street, staring at the sharp iron palings just beneath him. An overmastering impulse seized him to hurl himself out of the window. Appalled at this, he endeavoured to leave the window, but his feet seemed to be glued to the parquet. And the impulse to plunge grew in intensity. At this moment, he heard his wife's familiar voice.

"Joe——!"

The spell was broken. He turned with a gasp of relief, and, unconsciously, wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Whatever is the matter?"

He sank into a chair, muttering: "I—I don't know, I—I come all over queer, Susie. Do I look queer, old girl?"

"Yes; you do."

"I think I'll take a nip of sherry."

"No, you won't. You'll take two grains o' calomel to-night, and a Seidlitz powder to-morrow morning. It's liver."

"May be," said Quinney doubtfully. "But I feel right as rain now."

As he spoke Susan's sharp eyes discovered the Bouddha lying ignominiously upon the Aubusson carpet.

"What's that?" She pointed at the god.

"Don't you touch it!" he shouted.

"Fiddle! Why not?"

"Because—because, love, it's an accursed thing."

And then, in an awe-filled voice, he told her the little he knew.

Now women, the best of them, are admittedly subject to queer contrarieties. Quinney was well aware that Susan would have believed his story had he told it quietly on arrival. Now, she disbelieved it, and said so, tossing an incredulous head, almost mocking him.

"Have you had any sherry this morning?" she asked.

"No, I haven't, Mrs. Smarty. You don't believe this tale—hay?"

"Of course I don't. I've always said that sticks and stones would turn your head. You're acting like a luny. What did you pay for the beast? He's ugly enough, I must say, to upset any stomach."

"Don't you go a calling him names, dearie. I—I've a notion to bury him. He cost me five and twenty of the best."

"Five and twenty pounds?"

"The lac shrine is worth double."

"Is it? Now I'll tell you what to do, Joe. There are dealers in London who have done you down."

"Done me down——!"

"It's true, and you know it. Sell this little lot to one o' them."

Quinney eyed her with admiration.

"You're a marvel you are! For a woman brought up in a cathedral town, and a constant church-goer,

you take the bun." He chuckled, rubbing his hands. "I might sell it to Tom Tomlin, if I made the price right."

"You might, but you won't. There are—others."

She was about to pick up the Bouddha, but he shouted at her:

"You leave the dam thing alone."

Then he fished out of a drawer a pair of gloves, put them on, gingerly picked up the god, deposited him in the shrine, and shut the doors. Having done this, he felt much easier in his mind.

"That's that," he observed.

II

More time passed, and such is the influence which a true helpmeet exercises consciously and sub-consciously upon her husband that Quinney came to the conclusion that imagination, acting upon a liver possibly "out of whack," had befooled the cleverest dealer in the world. It was a habit, now engrained in him, to keep precious bits. Sooner or later the right purchaser would come along. Accordingly, the shrine remained in the sanctuary hardly noticed amongst the many "gems" of the collection.

One afternoon three people were invited to inspect Joe Quinney's treasures. Two out of the three challenged interest and attention because they were engaged to each other. The man wanted to give his beloved a handsome present. The third person, a woman, and obviously a connoisseur, accompanied the happy pair. Eventually, something was chosen, and the young couple departed. The friend remained.

Quinney was well content. He liked to chat comfortably with anybody who possessed special knowledge of porcelain and furniture. The lady, judging by appearances, seemed to be rich. As a matter of fact she was rich, and a widow. Quinney was impressed by her feline manner. She purred over his gems. And nothing escaped her eyes although heavy lids half hid them. Presently, she paused in front of the lacquer shrine, not saliently conspicuous.

"That is an exquisite bit, Mr. Quinney."

"It is. I offered it to Mr. Lark for fifty guineas, but he wouldn't have it."

"Fifty guineas? Really? It's a shrine, I see. Anything in it?"

"A jade Bouddha."

"How exciting! I adore jade Bouddhas. Let me see it."

"The Bouddha ain't worth looking at, ma'am."

"But I wish to see it."

Reluctantly, Quinney opened the doors. To his astonishment, his visitor displayed enthusiasm. And she spoke incisively, with unmistakable authority.

"It's very old, an authentic bit, a Museum bit."

As she spoke, she was about to take the Bouddha from the shrine, but Quinney held up his hand.

"Don't touch it, please."

His peremptory tone made her raise her lids. He looked into a pair of uncanny eyes, translucently green, wells of mystery, so he decided. And then, conscious of giving offence, he muttered confusedly:

"I—I only wanted to warn you, madam."

"Warn me? How extraordinary! What about? What against?"

"Perhaps," said Quinney cautiously, "I'm a bit of a fool. Looks like it, I must say."

But, having said this much, he had to say more under discreet pressure. Finally, he told the tale, very lamely and unconvincingly. The lady listened politely. When he finished, it was impossible to divine from her inscrutable face whether or not she was impressed. The mere telling of the absurd story impressed the narrator with a sense of his own credulity. After a slight pause, she said quietly:

"I am clairvoyante. You know what that means, Mr. Quinney?"

"Crystal gazin'—hay? Not in my line, ma'am."

"Nor in mine, although I have done it. I should like to hold the Bouddha in my hands for a minute, and—and see if it tells me anything. If I am tempted, as you were, to hurl myself out of the window, why, you will kindly prevent me."

She drew off her gloves, smiling.

"Have it your own way, ma'am."

"Yes; generally, I do. Not always."

He noticed that her hands were remarkable, exquisitely shaped, very soft and smooth. As her slender fingers grasped the Bouddha, he was oddly reminded of a monkey whom he had seen taking an egg with prehensile eagerness. She sat down and closed her eyes, just as he had done.

Nothing happened.

After a couple of minutes, the lady opened her eyes, rose silently, replaced the Bouddha, and smiled sweetly as she murmured:

"Imagination plays strange pranks, Mr. Quinney."

Joe Quinney flushed. The thrust went home. He decided that he would not mention this incident to Susan. Business instincts manifested themselves. He might be a fool on rare occasions, but he had a nose for a buyer.

"Yes," he admitted, with refreshing candour. "The silly yarn got a hold on me. All the same, I hate the little monster, and I'll let him go cheap."

"What do you call cheap?"

Quinney chuckled. His great success as a salesman was largely due to his seemingly transparent honesty. He answered promptly:

"We dealers don't know everything—we can't. I know nothing of Bouddhas, and very little about jade. You tell me, ma'am, that this is a museum bit. And if so, it's worth money. I can't price it at all. But —lac! You can't teach me much about lac. If you care to take the shrine at a fair price, I'll throw in the Bouddha for nothing. I paid five and twenty pounds for the cabinet with provincial dealers, mostly idiots, biddin' against me. The lot is yours for fifty pound. I asked guineas of Mr. Lark. You may have heard that I never haggle."

"Nor do I, Mr. Quinney. I'll take the—the lot. Send it to my house in Ennismore Gardens. I am Mrs. Mendel. Here is my card."

She gave the card to Quinney, and drew on her gloves.

"You will have a cheque to-morrow morning."

"That's quite all right, madam."

III

Mrs. Mendel went her way. Quinney packed up the shrine. Evidently foolishness was not quite purged out of him, for he put on his gloves before he handled the Bouddha. The shrine was enclosed in a deal case and addressed.

Before tea-time, the young couple came back. The man had bought for the maid a bit of Chelsea, because, as he told Quinney, she collected early English porcelain, and had a small cabinet nearly full of it. Quinney's easy pleasant manners had beguiled them. They returned to ask a favour. Would he look over the cabinet, and kindly indicate doubtful specimens?

"That will be strawberry jam for me," said Quinney.

"I have such a lot to learn, Mr. Quinney."

"So have I—so have I. I learn a bit every day."

"Do you? I can't tell the difference between Bow and Chelsea yet."

This talk took place in the salesroom downstairs. Quinney, not being too busy, said heartily:

"Now, look here. You step upstairs with me, and I'll try to make the difference clear to you here and now."

The young man glanced at a wrist watch.

"I must hop it, Iris. I weigh in at dinner. By—byee!"

Quinney and the young lady ascended to the sanctuary. He knew that her name was Hope, Miss Iris Hope. She prattled ingenuously about her fiancé, Colonel Arden.

"Colonel——?" ejaculated Quinney.

"Yes; he is very young to be a Colonel, isn't he?

He commanded his regiment at the end of the war."

From her soft voice when she spoke of her Colonel, Quinney divined that this was a love match, a fact that warmed the cockles of his ardent heart. In five minutes he knew much more about Colonel Arden. He had left the army to attend to a big property, lately inherited. From the first, Quinney had guessed that the tall, distinguished young man was a toff. Then he gave his undivided attention to explaining the difference between the pastes and glazes of Bow and Chelsea. For reasons which are easily understood he did not mention the sale of the Bouddha to Mrs. Mendel, but, just before leaving the sanctuary, Miss Iris Hope spoke of that lady, and in a tone of veiled hostility that quickened Quinney's curiosity.

"Does that Mrs. Mendel, who was with us, really know about things?"

"Yes."

"She is supposed to be extraordinarily clever. Colonel Arden says so."

"I expect he knows," said Quinney.

"Yes; she was, and is, an old friend of his. A very attractive woman?"

She spoke interrogatively, faintly blushing. Quinney wondered whether there had been love passages between Mrs. Mendel and Colonel Arden. He was shrewd enough judge of character to be certain that the lady belonged to the class of women who demand something warmer from men than platonic friendship. He recalled her slim, smooth fingers slipping round the Bouddha, caressing it.

He replied bluntly:

"I looked upon Mrs. Mendel as a possible customer."

Miss Iris Hope laughed, showing a dimple.

"Now, confess, Mr. Quinney, she beguiled you a little."

"No," he affirmed stoutly and honestly.

Before she left, he had promised to inspect her tiny collection, and a day was set, the following Tuesday. At parting, she held out her hand, royally democratic. Quinney was charmed.

"A good girl," he said to himself, "and a jolly partner. Fresh as dew. I hope the Colonel is worthy of her."

Then he dismissed the pair from his mind.

Later in the evening he sent for one of his assistants, and instructed him to leave the packed-up shrine and Bouddha at Mrs. Mendel's house. The assistant said an arresting word:

"Is she *the* Mrs. Mendel?"

"Now, what the 'ell d'ye mean by that, my lad?"

"I read the papers, sir."

"Do you? In my opinion you might be better employed. I don't. Who is *the* Mrs. Mendel?"

The assistant explained.

"I kind o' remember she lived in Ennismore Gardens, very rich. Her husband was a China merchant."

"Was he?"

That fact, of course, might account for her knowledge of Chinese lac and jade Bouddhas. Quinney added aggressively:

"What of it?"

"He died. There was an inquest. Something queer. But she, Mrs. Mendel, came out of it all right. Nothing was proved."

"But what in thunder did they want to prove?"

"His brother, or somebody, said that Mr. Mendel was poisoned. No poison was found in the body. The judge, I remember, slated the brother, accused him of prejudice. His nose, may be, pained him a bit, because every bob was left to the widow. That's all, sir."

"And quite enough, too. You take a taxi, and keep that case right side up."

"Yes, sir."

IV

Upon the following Tuesday, Quinney kept his appointment with Miss Hope. A smug butler ushered him into a girl's sitting-room, prettily decorated, a virginal bower. The china was in a mahogany cabinet, obviously a reproduction. Quinney sniffed at it. But he could see at a glance that some of the porcelain was first class. The general effect of the room was spoilt by innumerable wedding presents popped down anywhere and everywhere. Some had not yet been unpacked. Quinney was irritated by them.

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed loudly.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Quinney. What is rubbish?"

His hostess stood, smiling, on the threshold, amused by his confusion. If she expected apologies, she was mistaken. He shrugged his sturdy shoulders.

"What is rubbish?" he repeated. "I can tell you, no man better. Most faked stuff is rubbish. A lot o' this silverware is rubbish, thin, machine-made, badly modelled, too."

She went on smiling, not a bit offended, as she said quietly:

"I suppose it takes time as well as money to buy the right things. My best presents are not here. I hope you will find no rubbish in that cabinet."

Quinney put on his specs and went, conscientiously, to work, appraising each "bit" in turn. Three were taken out of the cabinet.

"Never put good stuff with bad," he admonished her. "You've a nice little lot, as is fitting. Like to like."

"That sounds a pretty compliment."

"You're soft paste. Bless you, I know. Glaze and decoration quite all right, too. I never pay compliments."

"Oh, Mr. Quinney——!"

"Say what I mean, and mean what I say—that's Joe Quinney."

"I am ever so much obliged to you for coming here. I wish you could see Colonel Arden's furniture. But I'm afraid you would find a lot of rubbish mixed up with it."

"Sure I should," said Quinney candidly. "Sometimes I think that we hold on to the rubbish, because there's a rubbishy side to our minds, specks and pinholes in the paste. And you can't get away from it—people are like the houses they live in. When I lived amongst my pore father's job lots I felt rotten."

She laughed gaily.

"You buck me up. I'm going to live in a lovely old house. I must show you the latest photograph of my Colonel."

Quinney stared keenly at the counterfeit presentment. A fine face confronted him—square chin, sensitive lips, deep-set eyes below a broad forehead.

"No pin-holes in that paste," he affirmed confidently. "By gum! path o' true love runs smooth to the altar, don't it?"

"So far—yes."

He was going away, after refusing a cup of tea, very happy in his mind, when his eye caught a packing case. He almost shied away from it.

"What's that?" he asked.

She was astonished at the change in his voice, but already she had envisaged him as a "card," an oddity, the more likable on that account.

"Oh, that is a present from Mrs. Mendel. I have not yet opened it. Very kind of her. I—I did not speak too handsomely of her to you the other day. It arrived yesterday."

"Um!"

"I'm sure it won't be rubbish. I suppose she has sent me something, because I am marrying an old friend of hers."

Quinney nodded. A minute later, he found himself in the street.

He didn't return to his house. Instead, he wandered into Hyde Park, more perturbed than he cared to admit. The two words "accursed thing" ravaged his sensibilities. He had been sorely tempted to tell his story for the third time to a third woman. But this nice girl might laugh at him, as Susan did. What ought he to do? Why hadn't he destroyed the leering god, and kept the shrine? As his imagination worked on the theme, he became more and more wretched and apprehensive. All his life he had trusted his instincts. He believed devoutly that a great gift from God was his unalienable possession. As an

ignorant boy, a white slave in an ignorant father's house, he had discriminated between good and bad. In this, his instincts had never led him astray. Persons had fooled him, not things. And this was an accursed thing.

He wandered half-way round the Serpentine before light illumined his darkness. Suddenly, a possible solution of the problem occurred to him. Why not lay the case before the Colonel? Let him act promptly. It was probable that the young lady intended to unpack Mrs. Mendel's present before her Colonel, guessing, as she must, that he would take a lively interest in the gift of an old friend. How could he find Colonel Arden? Where did he live?

He hurried back to Miss Hope's house, and rang the bell. When the smug butler opened the door, Quinney twinkled at him, speaking in a confidential whisper.

"Colonel Arden bought a bit o' china at my place. I want to speak to him about it. Can you tell me where I am likely to find him?"

The butler named a hotel in Jermyn Street, but was doubtful whether the Colonel would be in. Probably he would return in time to dress for dinner. Quinney bustled off. Before he reached Jermyn Street, it occurred to him that the Colonel might kick him downstairs, if he indicted the honour, or the honourable intentions of an old friend. To do so might defeat his ends. All the same, by this time he was convinced of three facts, shudderingly hideous. The Bouddha had brought about the suicide of the gentleman suffering from shell-shock; Mrs. Mendel *had* poisoned her husband; and she had sent the accursed

monster to an innocent girl in the hope that evil would follow. Instinct, in short, grafted on an obstinate temperament, triumphed over probability and all considerations that might weigh preponderantly in a court of law.

On arrival at the hotel, Quinney learned that the Colonel was "in" but "engaged."

"You needn't send up my name. I'll wait till he is disengaged."

He sat down in the hall and picked up an evening paper. Presently, when a smart lady descended the stairs and passed slowly in front of him, he hid behind the sheltering sheet. The lady was Mrs. Mendel, and her face to Quinney looked entirely evil.

"You're a reg'lar bad 'un," he thought. "What price the Chamber of 'Orrors at Madame Tussaud's?"

The Colonel received him in a small sitting-room. Quinney sniffed. He could just detect a faint odour of musk.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Quinney?"

"Do I look a fool?" asked Quinney.

The Colonel laughed, making a gesture that seemed to sweep such a suggestion to the void.

"I'm not a fool, Colonel, but you may think me one when I've finished the story I've come here to tell. Do you believe that things, inanimate things, can work evil to persons?"

"It may be so, Mr. Quinney. I have had no experience to justify belief or disbelief. In regard to what is called the occult, I carry an open mind."

"I believe, I—I know, that Miss Hope has been sent, as a wedding present, an evil thing, a thing that works evil. It's a jade Bouddha. I was warned

against it by the party from whom I bought it. I wish to God I'd chucked it into the river, but I didn't. It lives in a yellow lac shrine, a real beauty. A lady bought the lot, and sent it to Miss Hope. She hasn't unpacked it yet. I saw the case in Miss Hope's sitting-room, when I went there this afternoon to take a squint at her porcelain. I didn't want to frighten her, but I was frightened, by gum, and I'm scared stiff—now."

He wiped his forehead with a bandana. The Colonel accepted his statement soberly.

"Did the lady know anything about the Bouddha, about the warning given to you by the former possessor?"

Quinney was unprepared for this leading question, but incapable of evading it.

"I told her the tale. I thought at the time that she reckoned me an idiot. Then she said she was clairvoyante. She held the Bouddha in her hand for quite a time. Apparently, it told her nothing. She as good as said so. She bought Bouddha and shrine; never haggled; sent me a cheque for fifty pound next morning."

The Colonel's self-possession seemed to ooze from him. He exclaimed, almost angrily:

"You affirm that a lady has sent Miss Hope a present worth fifty pounds? And you say she sent you a cheque. Then you know her name. What is it?"

"Mrs. Mendel."

The Colonel jumped up.

"I can't believe this. No offence! There is some absurd mistake."

"I packed the dam thing up myself, with gloves

on, too. I wouldn't touch it with my naked hands for twice fifty pound." And then he told his story.

The Colonel nodded, engrossed in thought. Swiftly, his brow cleared; he spoke pleasantly:

"You saw the case; you recognized it. But you didn't see what was in it. I venture to bet, Mr. Quinney, that the case holds some quite unexciting present, one worth five pounds at the very most."

Quinney squirmed in his chair. This likely hypothesis had not occurred to him. It sounded reasonable. He had, indeed, selected a nice new case, the sort of thing that might be used again to pack up glass or silver or china. Heaving a prodigious sigh, he said despondently:

"May be you're right, and may be you ain't."

"I tell you Mrs. Mendel, who hardly knows Miss Hope, would not dream of giving her a present worth fifty pounds."

Discretion was not Quinney's strong point. And he was secretly piqued by a plausible explanation, which, if true, exhibited a shrewd man in cap and bells. He said sharply:

"But Mrs. Mendel is a friend of yours."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"Miss Hope told me so."

The Colonel flushed slightly.

"Miss Hope is mistaken. Mrs. Mendel is not a friend of mine. For that reason, also, I am sure that you have made a ludicrous mistake."

"But, if I haven't——? What then?"

"I shall see Miss Hope to-morrow. We shall unpack this case together."

"It may be unpacked at this very minute."

Quinney showed such excitement that the younger man was visibly impressed.

"As to that," he said slowly, "I think I can satisfy you. Please wait here. Help yourself to a cigar. I will 'phone Miss Hope at once. I shall ask her not to unpack the case to-night, and if she has unpacked it, and if—if it contains the shrine and the Bouddha, I shall beg her not to touch either."

"Fine," said Quinney.

V

Colonel Arden was absent for some ten minutes. When he returned his eyes were smouldering, and Quinney perceived that the pupils of them were dilated.

"Miss Hope has opened the case," said the Colonel.

"Tell me quick that I've made a fool of myself, and I'll go home happy."

"The case contained a yellow lac cabinet about a foot high."

"I knew it. But the Bouddha?"

The Colonel spoke guardedly:

"Fortunately, if the former possessor of the Bouddha is to be believed, Miss Hope has not touched the Bouddha, nor seen it. She was actually unpacking the case when I 'phoned."

"Well, I'm blowed——! Her guardian angel is taking a hand in this."

"Without alarming Miss Hope, I have asked her not to open the shrine. At this moment, it is locked up with the more valuable presents in a small spare bedroom. It will remain there till I arrive to-morrow."

"We might go there to-night."

"You are a good fellow, Mr. Quinney. I'll admit to you that I am not easy in my mind. In any case," his voice hardened, "this present will be returned to Mrs. Mendel. I can trust Miss Hope unreservedly. I am dining out to-night, an engagement of some importance. To cancel it, to appear suddenly at Mr. Hope's house, would arouse what I particularly wish to avoid—gossip. Probably Miss Hope would have a sleepless night."

"Yes," said Quinney. He added more cheerfully: "The little beast has been in my possession for some months, safe in the shrine. You're dead right, Colonel. To-morrow will do. Good evening! I'd take it as a favour if you'd 'phone me as soon as the Bouddha is out of the house. I shan't settle down to business properly till I know."

"Certainly, Mr. Quinney."

VI

Quinney returned to Soho Square. He was tempted to tell his faithful Susan everything, but he feared a mocking tongue. On the mere face of it, his story was preposterous—and he knew it. He was clever enough to view himself with detachment. He recognized a dual personality: the Quinney who relied upon sharpened powers of observation, and the Quinney who trusted his astounding instincts. He could gloat, deservedly, over the fruits of experience; but he never forgot that queer, disconcerting, subliminal self that soared above experience.

After supper, when Mrs. Quinney was busy else-

where, a disturbing thought obsessed him. The Colonel intended to return the Bouddha to Mrs. Mendel. But that meant placing a deadly weapon into the hand of an abandoned and wicked woman. He comforted himself with this reflection: "Maybe the beast will turn on her."

Next morning from ten onwards, he hovered about his telephone. No message came from Colonel Arden. At noon, however, that gentleman appeared, and was shown at once into the sanctuary. A glance at his pale face satisfied Quinney that something unforeseen had taken place. The Colonel said quickly:

"Miss Hope is shaken in her nerves, but, otherwise, perfectly well."

"What has happened?"

"In a few hours all London will know what has happened. Mr. Hope's house was burgled last night."

"That beats the band!"

"The burglar was single-handed. His objective was the room that held the valuable presents, which included a string of pearls."

"He got 'em?"

The Colonel replied grimly:

"He got all he expected—and more. We may presume that the lac shrine attracted his attention, after he had filled a small handbag with jewellery. He must have opened it and taken the Bouddha. He took other articles, a couple of miniatures, of which he couldn't have known the value. They were found in his bag."

"Ho! So the bag was recovered?"

"Yes. The Bouddha was in his pocket."

"Better and better. The rascal was caught?"

The Colonel answered sombrely :

" He was found dead, with a crushed skull, in the area. The police think that he slipped when getting out of the window. You and I, nobody else, nobody else," he repeated with emphasis, and Quinney nodded, " may hazard another and less probable conjecture."

" Quite," agreed Quinney, moistening his dry lips with his tongue. " And the Bouddha ? "

" The fragments of the Bouddha are in the dust-bin. I have returned the shrine to Mrs. Mendel."

Quinney, at what cost to himself nobody will ever know, remained silent. His silence was rewarded.

" I can trust you," said the Colonel, after a long pause.

" You can, Colonel," affirmed Quinney confidently.

" Mrs. Mendel is leaving England. I cannot doubt —would that I could !—her guilt, not only in this unhappy affair, but in another. Not half an hour ago she revealed herself to me as a woman of unsound mind, evil to the marrow, and absolutely unscrupulous. I don't think we shall hear of her again."

But they did.

Two weeks later all England heard of her. She had taken a cabin de luxe on a transatlantic liner. Somewhere off Cape Clear she disappeared. A man on watch testified that he heard a splash on the star-board quarter shortly after midnight. Quinney said to himself :

" She had the Bouddha in her naked hands for a couple of minutes."

Possessed

I

QUINNEY bought the chair at a sale just out of London, a sale of no importance. Really, being in an impish mood, he had dropped in to bid up prices against a ring of unscrupulous dealers. But he liked the chair because it puzzled him, being of odd craftsmanship, and made out of some wood quite unfamiliar to him. He decided, after a prolonged "squint" at it, that it might have come from the Balkans or Russia.

To his annoyance he had to pay more than he expected, partly, perhaps, because the dealers who hated him bid against him. After the sale, a little "runner," with a simian face and prehensile hands, came grinning up to him.

"Take care o' that chair, Mr. Quinney."

"For why?" growled Quinney.

"Because it may walk itself off, out o' your premises, see?"

Joe replied testily:

"You walk yourself off."

Returning to Soho Square, the words of the "runner" who ran about picking up "bits" of furniture and bits of information, sizzled in his mind.

"Walk itself off," he repeated to himself. "What does the little rascal mean?"

Before nightfall, the chair was delivered and placed in the sanctuary. Quinney, magnifying lens in hand, examined it critically.

It was an arm-chair, fantastically carved, with a high back. The wood might be teak or ebony. The design of the carving was oriental in character, probably Chinese. Out of intertwined boughs and leaves peered faces, hideous faces—gargoyles. One, in particular, challenged particular attention, because it leered horribly, so abominably that Quinney shook his fist at it.

"You beast, you!" he exclaimed.

As a connoisseur, however, his eyes lingered pleasantly upon the needlework covers of back and seat. These, assuredly, were not oriental, but European, and of eighteenth century design. Silk had been used, of the best quality, and hair. The hair puzzled Quinney. It was finer than horsehair, and of different colours.

"A very rum old chair," said Quinney.

It looked extremely comfortable. After closing time, Quinney pulled it up to the fire and sat down in it.

Within a minute or two he fell asleep, waking up with a disagreeable start to discover that he was trembling, and mightily pleased to be awake. As he rubbed his eyes, he muttered: "Ugly dream—beastly dream!" But he couldn't remember the dream.

Glancing at his watch, he stood up. Briskly he turned to leave the room, but it was impossible, as

Susan complained, for Joe Quinney to leave the sanctuary without pausing to "gloat" over one or other of his precious possessions. He paused on this occasion to gaze lovingly at the latest acquisition: a Cosway drawing, delicately tinted, of a stately Georgian dame.

"Ain't you a beauty!" he chuckled.

Turning reluctantly from her, he remembered that the chair had been left too near the fire. He was cranky (Susan's word) about such matters. Indeed, the sanctuary, according to Susan, was kept during winter at too low a temperature, simply because lacquer, for instance, like claret, might suffer if overwarmed.

The chair had moved.

Quinney glared at it, hardly believing his eyes. It had moved at least a yard.

"Am I still dreaming?" the dealer asked himself.

After half a minute's reflection, he decided that he must, unconsciously, have pushed back the chair when he rose out of it. It was exactly what he would do. And yet, a queer conviction asserted itself that he had not done so. At the same moment, the "runner's" warning came back to him:

"*It may walk itself off.*"

He approached the chair, pensively. A struggle began between common sense and imagination. Common sense distinguished Quinney. For many years he had scoffed at his Susan because she believed in ghosts. But the affair of the jade Bouddha had disturbed and shaken his conviction that spooky things didn't really happen.

He took a bit of chalk from his pocket. Then,

half-ashamed of himself, he pushed back the chair into its former position, chalked four circles around the four legs upon the parquet floor, and stood erect beside it.

" You get out o' that, if you can," he said, addressing the chair derisively.

Jauntily, he walked to the door. This time, he paused to stare angrily at a small tabouret, condemned that morning as a " cripple." He had paid too much for it, believing it to be sound all over. One of the legs had been faked magnificently. Assured of this, Quinney had ordered William, his foreman, to remove the " cripple " downstairs, where it would be labelled and priced as imperfect. This meant the loss of some few pounds; Quinney detested losses which arose out of errors of judgment.

" Lots to learn yet," he murmured.

He marched on to the door, determined not to look back. To do so would indicate an admission that a " runner " was playing the goat with a man at the head of the profession. Swearing to himself that he would not look back, he did. And, like Lot's wife, he stood petrified, a pillar of amazement.

The chair had moved.

Quinney apostrophized it rudely:

" What the hell d'ye mean by it ? "

As the chair made no reply, Quinney rushed to his Chippendale cabinet, unlocked it, and fortified failing powers of body and mind with a glass of old sherry.

" Am I going dotty ? "

Such things happened to men past middle age. If this astounding phenomenon had taken place in

Tomlin's shop, testified to by Tomlin, Quinney would have reminded an old friend that port and champagne in frequent juxtaposition might account for anything.

"I'm sober as any judge, soberer, by gum!"

He left the sanctuary.

II

Nor did he enter it again that night. He was tempted to confide in Susan. Two considerations prevented him. She might be frightened out of her wits. She might laugh at him. After a hearty supper, he felt better, but he only returned to the sanctuary to lock the door.

Next morning, before breakfast, he peeped in.

The chair had not moved.

All that morning, he was busy on the ground floor. Perhaps for the first time in his life he felt no wish to gloat over a new possession. Obstinacy prevented him from violently ejecting the chair, obstinacy and a tincture of curiosity.

Just before noon, his august friend, the patron of his youth, Lord Mel, called to see him upon a matter of trivial importance. He lingered to talk with Quinney about Derby bisque porcelain, which he collected. As he was going he said pleasantly:

"Got anything out of the ordinary, Joe?"

"Yes," said Quinney, almost explosively.

"What is it?"

"A chair, my lord. I—I believe it's possessed of the devil."

Lord Mel burst out laughing.

Quinney felt affronted. Possibly, a man who had served his apprenticeship as a diplomat in half a dozen European courts noticed this. He stopped laughing, pressed Quinney's arm, and said pleasantly:

"Tell me all about it, my dear fellow."

"Step upstairs, my lord, and I will."

They went upstairs and into the sanctuary, where a surprise awaited them. It was Susan's habit to dust the valuable china between the hours of eleven and twelve, not altogether a labour of love, because, as it may be remembered, she regarded the precious collection as "sticks and stones" before which her Joe bowed down and worshipped.

Lord Mel and Quinney found Susan in the sanctuary white and trembling. Regardless of Lord Mel, she rushed at Quinney and clutched him.

"Lord love you, Susie, what's the matter?"

She pointed at the chair.

"That," she said. Then, pulling herself together, she addressed Lord Mel:

"I beg your lordship's pardon. I'm just scared out o' my poor wits. If you will kindly excuse me ——"

"Sit you down," said Joe, with authority, leading her to the Chippendale settee, the finest work of the Master. "Sit you down, Susie. Lord Mel is our friend. Tell us, dearie, what has frightened you and —and what that chair has to do with it?"

"Please, Mrs. Quinney," said Lord Mel.

Susan sat down. So did his lordship. Quinney remained standing.

"Take your own time, dear," enjoined Quinney.

Susan moistened dry lips.

"I was dusting, as usual," she began. "Then I noticed the chair, Joe. I'd never seen it before."

"Bought it yesterday, Susie."

"Did you? When I saw it, Joe, I felt at once the queerest wish to sit in it."

Lord Mel looked at the chair.

"A very comfortable chair," he remarked.

"Comfortable——? You wait, my lord."

"I certainly shall, Mrs. Quinney."

"Presently, I did sit down in it, after pulling it nearer to the fire."

"Did that, did you?" murmured her lord and master.

"Because it's none too warm in this room in November. In two-two's, Joe, I was asleep."

"Ah-h-h!"

"And then I had the awfullest dream."

She shivered, covering her face with her hands.

"Can you tell us about the dream, dear?"

"In a sort o' way—yes. I seemed to be in a big room, almost empty, with rugs and cushions. A man was pacing up and down, like—like a wild beast. He didn't seem to notice me, but he came nearer and nearer to me. In the dream, Joe, I made out, somehow, that he meant to kill me, and I couldn't move."

"A common experience in nightmare," murmured Lord Mel.

"Lord! Yes," assented Quinney.

"Why should I have nightmare in the morning?" asked Mrs. Quinney. She went on:

"The dream itself was bad enough, my lord, but that by itself wouldn't have frightened me. I seemed to wake up. And I couldn't move out of that chair.

The arms were round me, pinning me down and in. I wanted to scream, Joe, but I didn't scream, did I ? "

" No," said Quinney, quietly. " We was just underneath ; we should have heard you, Susie, if you had screamed. Go on ! "

" I suppose, then, I really woke up."

" Is that all ? "

" No—it isn't."

She began trembling again. Quinney sat beside her and slipped an arm round her waist. She looked miserably at Lord Mel.

" You must think me a silly old woman, my lord."

Lord Mel answered gravely :

" I can assure you, Mrs. Quinney, that I think nothing of the sort. But, if you feel too unstrung to finish this extraordinary story, I shall quite understand."

" I must finish it. When—when I did come quite to myself, I wasn't frightened. I was only grateful to find myself awake. And then I discovered that I wasn't sitting near the fire, but where the chair is now. It had moved—with me in it—with me in it."

Lord Mel tried to calm her.

" But, Mrs. Quinney, I think all this can be easily explained. You went to sleep. You had one of those vivid, horrible dreams that upset the strongest of us. In your dream you struggled. You tried to get out of the chair. Whilst struggling you moved the chair. What more likely ? "

Susan brightened.

" I hadn't thought of that," she admitted. " Fact

is I'm too shaken still to think at all. Thank you, my lord."

She stood up. Quinney and Lord Mel rose with her. Quinney kissed her.

"You go to your own snug sitting-room, Susie. And as it's no earthly asking you to have a glass o' Bristol Milk, I advise you to hearten yourself up with a cup o' cocoa."

"To be sure I will," said Susan.

She left the room.

III

Quinney looked at his kind patron, who said courteously:

"I'm sorry I laughed, Joe. Apparently the chair *is* possessed."

"It won't be possessed by me much longer, my lord."

Lord Mel examined it.

"The needlework is remarkable," he said at length. "And I think, from the pattern, that it is Spanish work, although the chair itself may be oriental. But you have noticed, of course, the exciting thing——?"

"I don't know that I have, my lord."

"Lend me your lens."

After further inspection Lord Mel continued:

"Yes; long beautiful tresses of different colours from the heads of half a dozen women have been worked into this chair."

"By gum! You're right," exclaimed Quinney.

Then he told his experience of the night before. Lord Mel nodded.

"I don't pretend to account for phenomena which

transcend my personal and limited experience. But I should like my friend Brent to see this chair ? "

" Certainly. Who is Mr. Brent ? "

" Sir John Brent is a well-known criminologist who spent many years in Spain. I left him, not half an hour ago, in the morning-room of *The Parthenon*. He always lunches there at half-past one. My car is outside. A note from me will bring him here in a quarter of an hour."

" Please write the note, my lord."

" He's a bit of a card, Joe."

" So am I, my lord. There's paper and pens on that Regency desk."

Lord Mel scribbled a few lines and despatched them by his chauffeur. Quinney remained staring at the chair. When Lord Mel rejoined him, he said, tentatively :

" Shall we rip the covers off, before Sir John comes ? "

" Um ! "

" I don't believe they have been off since they were put on. I can do the job myself. And I will. The tools are downstairs."

He hurried from the room.

Lord Mel glanced about him and sat down in the chair, after drawing it closer to the fire. Then he let his hands rest lightly on his knees, lay back, and closed his eyes. . . .

Quinney returned in less than five minutes to find Lord Mel fast asleep. To disturb the slumbers of a marquess of the realm is deemed almost sacrilege by an honest Briton of the middle class.

" My lord——"

Quinney touched his patron's shoulder; he pressed it; he shook it. Lord Mel remained insensible to voice and touch. Cold beads of perspiration gathered upon Quinney's forehead. Was his lordship in a fit? Was—was he dying? Or—dead?

At the moment an uncanny change took place in the placid countenance which Quinney knew so well. Terror informed the dignified face. The finely-cut lips curved back from the teeth in a snarling expression. The heavy lids seemed to vanish under overhanging brows. Lord Mel's kindly blue eyes protruded, bloodshot, staring, squinting——!

It was too much for Quinney. He forgot about the chair, because he was certain that his worst fears were realized. His old friend had been seized by some dreadful physical convulsion. By this time his hands were twitching; a slaver of froth fringed his lips. He tried to rise.

Hardly aware of what he was doing, Quinney seized Lord Mel by both shoulders and forced him back into the chair. But Lord Mel, a much older man, proved to be the more powerful. He staggered to his feet, carrying Quinney with him. At the same instant, his muscles relaxed. Quinney thought he had fainted. To his immense surprise and relief, Lord Mel spoke naturally:

"What has happened?"

Quinney took him to the settee, and forthwith prescribed the remedy so efficacious in emergency—a glass of Bristol Milk. In less than a minute Lord Mel became his calm normal self.

"I sat in that damned chair, Joe—as—as an experiment."

"You always was a good plucked 'un, my lord."

"There's no fool like an old fool."

"You had a beastly dream?"

"I—I can't remember it."

"Nor could I. I found you, my lord, in a sort of fit. I thought for the moment 'twas epilepsy."

"Impossible!"

"Looked like it. We had a rough-and-tumble. You got the best of it. But—this is the odd thing—as soon as you left the chair and stood up, you became natural again."

As they were staring at each other, Sir John Brent was announced.

He came in quietly, but nobody who knew the criminologist accused him of being too quiet. He was an ugly little man, a bundle of energies, thin and sun-scorched, deeply wrinkled, over-browed, a remarkable personality in any company. It was said of him that he preferred his own.

Lord Mel introduced Quinney, adding with a gleam of humour in his eyes:

"Mr. Quinney thinks—and so do I—that a purchase of his, a remarkable chair, is possessed of a devil."

Nothing surprised Sir John. He raised his shaggy eyebrows, glancing sharply at Quinney. Of the two men, Quinney and Lord Mel, the dealer presented that sturdy matter-of-fact, reassuring appearance which we associate with hard-headed men of business. Lord Mel had the soft eyes, the arching delicate brows of a dreamer. Sir John addressed Quinney:

"You—you affirm that a chair is possessed of a devil?"

"That chair is."

He pointed at the chair, which still stood near the bright steel fender.

Sir John approached the chair and stared at it.

"We were going to rip off the covers," said Quinney.

"Before you do so," suggested Lord Mel, "it might be well to give Sir John the facts as—as they have forced themselves upon our notice."

"Yes," said Sir John.

He rejoined the two men who were standing in the middle of the fine room. Quinney, fearful of little except ridicule, told the story curtly, avoiding comment. From time to time Sir John seemed to smile derisively, but he kept his alert eyes upon the face of the speaker. So did Lord Mel. When Quinney finished, Sir John said incisively:

"Thank you, Mr. Quinney. I take from your interesting narrative the one item that strikes me as incredible. The chair moves of its own volition."

"Yes."

"I can't believe it."

"Will you look at it again?"

An exclamation not heard in drawing-rooms broke from Sir John's lips. He had left the chair not five minutes previously close to the fender. It was now more than a yard away.

Lord Mel hid a smile behind a discreet hand.

"Shall I take off the covers?" asked Quinney.

"Please."

Quinney removed the seat first. Below the canvas was much ill-smelling horse-hair. Tearing this out, he drew forth, triumphantly, a small flat box made of thin sheets of copper. Quinney handed it to Lord

Mel, who walked to the window. The others accompanied him.

Lord Mel read aloud a name, scratched upon the copper:

"*José Clodomiro Santivanez.*"

Sir John dropped another exclamation.

"The name is familiar to you?" asked Lord Mel.

"Yes."

"Under the name," continued Lord Mel, "is a motto. No—it's not a motto." He read aloud impressively:

"*Requiescat in Profundis.*"

"What does that mean?" asked Quinney.

Sir John answered:

"It is a derisive hope, Mr. Quinney, that Don José Clodomiro Santivanez may rest—if he can—in the nethermost depths of Hell."

"Evidently he can't," muttered Lord Mel.

Sir John took the box from him. His voice vibrated as he said grimly:

"This box may clear up a mystery that baffled the most enlightened brains in Spain more than a hundred years ago. Before we open the box, shall I tell you what I know about Santivanez?"

"Do."

"He was a potter, something of a genius, but dissolute to the *n*th degree. Let us call him the Landru of the eighteenth century. He had affairs with several women, who disappeared. Then in his turn he vanished. Not a trace of him was ever discovered. He left a beautiful widow, who destroyed his pottery and his pots. Suspicion fastened on her, but nothing was proved. Ultimately, if my memory

serves me, she died in the odour of sanctity. Is it possible that the hair on those covers came from the heads of the women who disappeared ? "

" Let us open the copper box," said Quinney.

It was hermetically sealed, soldered down, like a sardine box. Comedy is ever on the surface of tragedy. The box was opened with a can-opener !

It contained ashes and a sheet of yellow parchment.

Brent translated from the original Spanish.

" I, Dolores Santivanez, have placed this, my confession, in a box which holds all that is left of my husband, José Santivanez. I am hiding the box in a chair which he used, and which is horrible to me because the hair of the unhappy women whom he murdered has been woven into the covers by his orders. I shall hide it in a garret. I have killed him as he killed them. As he intended to kill me. The wretch who helped him has helped me, because he hates a cruel and wicked master. The women were burnt in the great furnace which my husband constructed for his pottery. His great gifts were subordinated to his hideous lusts. I, soh is accomplice confessed to me, was to be his next victim. Now his ashes are before me as I write these lines. Who will guess that what is left of the monster is hidden in the chair he used. But even he could never sit still in it. I behold him pushing it restlessly from him. I behold him, as I saw him yesterday, pacing up and down this room, glancing at me, hating me because I hate him as the others learnt to hate him. And yet—superstitious wretch that he is—he desires to lie in holy ground. He has designed a superb

tomb for himself, the chief of sinners. But it shall not be. May my curse lie heavy on him! May his restless spirit wander over the face of the earth, even as the Jew, who spat upon our Lord, seeks rest and never finds it. Amen!"

IV

Lord Mel insisted upon giving luncheon to Quinney and Brent. Before they left the sanctuary, the box was replaced, temporarily, in the chair. As they went out of the room, Quinney locked the door and pocketed the key.

Luncheon may be described as rather a gruesome meal. Brent talked about noted criminals till Quinney's hair stood on end. But, after coffee and cigars, balm was spread upon his lacerated tissues. Brent offered the dealer a handsome profit on the chair.

"I collect that sort of thing," he said casually.

Quinney was transported to Madame Tussaud's. It occurred to his active mind that such a chair ought to rest, if it could, in the Chamber of Horrors, not far from the hideous knife that decapitated thousands during the Terror. An enterprising Managing Director of an institution so justly popular might fork out fifty guineas for so remarkable a relic.

Inspired by this happy thought Quinney did not close outright with Brent's offer.

"Let me think it over, Sir John," he said. "My wife, maybe, will have a word to say."

Lord Mel was amused. Quinney, as he knew, did not consult his better half upon matters of business. But this, he told himself, was not perhaps altogether a matter of business.

It was past three when Quinney returned to Soho Square. He ascended the wide stairs, unlocked the door of the sanctuary, and marched in, head erect. Could he get seventy-five guineas for the chair?

It was gone!

Quinney reeled. Once more the words of the simian-faced "runner" became positively audible:

"It may walk itself off—out o' your premises."

It had, by gum!

He fell gasping on to the settee.

"Whatever is the matter, Joe?"

Quinney extended a shaking forefinger.

"It's gone, Susie, it's walked itself off."

Susan smiled faintly. Then, compressing her still pretty lips, she said sharply:

"It has. I—I walked it off."

"You?"

He remembered that she had a duplicate key to the room which he spoke of to customers as "her" room.

"Yes, Joe. I was outside the door when you three men were colloguing together. I heard every dreadful word that was said."

"Just like you," said Quinney tartly.

"No, Joe, it ain't like me, but circumstances alter cases. Anyway, I listened. And, as soon as you'd gone, I took William and between us we smashed up that hateful chair and burnt it in the back yard, covers and all."

"But the box——?"

"I thought, maybe, you'd like to give the box to Sir John."

"Give it?"

"You wouldn't try to make money out of such a horror as this, would you?"

"Never you mind! What did you do with what was in the box? Where are the—ashes?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know——!"

"On their way to blue water, I hope. I emptied the ashes down the scullery sink."

Quinney stared at her, not resentfully.

"Susie," he said, after a pause, "I have a notion that what's left o' that Spanish beast has gone home."

The Ming Vase

I

COLLECTORS, taking them as they come, may be divided into two classes: the real connoisseurs to whose carefully-trained eyes the beauty of an object makes a supreme appeal, and the others to whom beauty is as nothing compared with rarity. Sometimes beauty and rarity are combined, and then we behold rich men bidding against each other with a fine frenzy of enthusiasm and recklessness. Ask any dealer what a famous "bit" is worth, and he will reply cautiously: "What it will fetch at public auction."

Amongst the trade it was known that bidding would be lively when a certain Ming Vase was put up at Christie's. This rare piece of porcelain was painted in blue underglaze, with other colours superimposed in enamel. It had been found in a West Country vicarage after the decease of its owner. Apparently, with that curious ignorance of values so common among country gentlemen, the parson had known that he owned "a good bit." His grandmother, who left him her china, had told him so. But neither she nor he knew more about it than that. The parson vaguely supposed that it might be worth,

perhaps, twenty or thirty pounds. His neighbours were no wiser. He died, after a long life of economy and cheese-paring, quite ignorant of the tremendous fact—tremendous to him—that in his back drawing-room, in a glazed cupboard, stood an object which was destined to sell at public auction for a sum that, invested at five per cent., would have added a hundred a year to his slender income!

After his death his few possessions passed to his daughter, an elderly spinster. Miss Carey intended to die in Pudcombe Regis, where she had lived and laboured. She moved her belongings to a pretty cottage, and amongst them the Ming Vase, which she carried in a band-box. It occurred to her that if her dear father had been right in supposing that this nice jar was worth twenty pounds, it might be her duty to sell it. She contemplated with mild satisfaction the safe investment of twenty pounds in bees and chickens. But in her heart she feared that her sire—bless him!—was mistaken.

Not being a fool, she decided to find out, approximately, what the vase *was* worth. Happy chance assisted her. She met one afternoon, when drinking tea at the squire's house, a collector of china, and she mentioned the vase to him, describing it quite incorrectly. Nevertheless the curiosity of the visitor was excited. Next morning he walked down to the cottage, and to his amazement discovered a specimen of Ming which would bear comparison with the choicest bits in the Salting Collection.

"Is it worth twenty pounds?" asked his hostess.

"More than that," he replied. A horrible temptation assailed him. He recognized that an offer of

five-and-twenty pounds would be gratefully accepted. And no philosopher has yet ventured to set forth the ethics involved in buying and selling rare porcelain. Collectors themselves, with rarest exceptions, hold the opinion that it is lawful to buy in the cheapest market and to sell in the dearest. Only those who are collectors and connoisseurs will understand the emotions which ravaged this quiet gentleman as he gently caressed the Ming Vase. To his credit, be it said, the fearful struggle was soon over. He said:

"My dear lady, unless I am very much mistaken, you are the happy owner of one of the finest vases in existence. If you wish to sell it, there is only one course to pursue. Send it to Christie's. It may bring anything between one and two thousand pounds."

The elderly spinster came within measurable distance of a seizure!

II

The vase was seen and admired by the elect before it came under the hammer. And it fetched two thousand guineas. Two men were left in for the penultimate bid—Joe Quinney, the famous dealer, and Sir Henry Brockenhurst. Sir Henry was bidding for himself; Joe Quinney was acting for an eccentric client who had instructed his agent to go as far as two thousand pounds. That was the penultimate bid. When Sir Henry gently murmured "guineas," Joe Quinney sighed and shook his head. The hammer fell.

Sir Henry, be it said, belonged to the less worthy class of collectors. A very rich man, and something of a pincher, he invariably invested (his word) money

in rarities. He boasted that none could find a "cripple" in his collection. And he knew—none better—that his investments were gilt-edged. After the sale, he had a word with Quinney.

"I suppose," he said, "you were bidding for old Misterton?"

Quinney nodded, feeling aggressively unhappy. He would have liked vastly well to have secured the vase for his client, because old Misterton adored beauty. This Ming Vase would have added a year at least to his life. Quinney himself gloated over it. Indeed, he had been sorely tempted to go on bidding "on his own."

"Would you take a reasonable profit, Sir Henry, if my client offered it?"

"Certainly not. The vase is unique."

"Those vases were made in pairs. Do you know anything of the history of this one?"

Sir Henry knew nothing, and said so. Nobody knew. The vase had been inherited by an old lady, who passed it on to her grandson. That story had been printed, as Quinney, of course, was well aware. Quinney mumbled something to himself, congratulated Sir Henry not too effusively, and went his way. He took a taxi to a house facing Regent's Park, where he found old Misterton, in a flowered dressing-gown, impatiently walking up and down the room which held his ceramic collections.

"Got it?" growled Misterton.

"I went your limit, Mr. Misterton. Sir Henry Brockenhurst went guineas. The vase is his."

Mr. Misterton's language became unprintable. Quinney, knowing his man, waited patiently till the

storm had passed. Misterton ended almost in tears.

"I wanted that bit of Ming, Joe, more than I have wanted anything."

"I'm wondering if its mate is hidden away somewhere."

"Not likely."

"Not at all likely."

Quinney returned to his own house, which held his private collection. He told Susan what had passed, and expressed lively regret that such a specimen had gone to the wrong man. Susan sniffed. It seemed to her positively criminal that such prices should be paid for china pots. But she thanked her stars that Joe had not bought the vase for himself. A woman's curiosity urged her to put this question to her masterful lord:

"Why should you care, Joe, whom this jar belongs to, eh?"

Joe let himself go for the thousandth time. The vase was an object of superlative beauty, a miracle of potting and decoration, a gem of purest ray serene wasted upon a pincher who gloated over it as an investment—nothing else. He would brag about it before his guests, men of business like himself. Old Misterton would have kept the thing in his bedroom, jealously guarded from the uninitiated. He could see old Misterton saying his prayers to it. Susan said tartly:

"You and your old Mistertons are heathens. If you was Christians you'd buy this wonderful jar and give it to the nation. Then we should all have a chance to enjoy ourselves."

Joe Quinney grinned and went downstairs to the

shop. But he was not satisfied. He wondered whether he could spare time to run down to Pudcombe Regis. If he found himself in Exeter any time, he would surely do so.

III

What Quinney predicted came to pass. Sir Henry Brockenhurst took the vase to his house near Weybridge, and placed it conspicuously in his drawing-room, full of just such rare and beautiful objects. Once placed, it ceased to interest him except as a bargain to exhibit to other collectors. He took malicious pleasure in inviting old Misterton to come and look at it whenever he felt so inclined. Old Misterton availed himself of this invitation, and spent a silent half-hour adoring the Ho-Ho bird, a sort of exotic crane, never beheld on land or sea, which possesses divine attributes amongst the Chinese. This bird was painted translucently upon the Ming Vase.

With old Misterton came his son, Larry, a young officer, greatly interested in another possession of Sir Henry's—to wit, his daughter Celia. Larry gave undivided attention to Celia, whilst his father was standing entranced before the Ho-Ho. The Mistertons stayed to luncheon.

After luncheon, over coffee and cigars, as soon as the fathers were alone by themselves, old Misterton offered Sir Henry what Susan Quinney would have called an "unreasonable" profit on his latest purchase. Sir Henry refused that offer peremptorily, although he was a man of business. This oddly-contrasted pair had known each other for many years,

but they remained acquaintances. Sir Henry spoke of Misterton as a crank; Misterton told his son that Celia's father was a *faux bonhomme*. Each visited the other to look at things, quite regardless of persons. Misterton, however, having an eye for beauty in any form, took particular notice of Celia. Sir Henry, on the other hand, regarded Larry as negligible.

Whilst the fathers were smoking their cigars in the dining-room, Larry and Celia were colloguing on the lawn. Having discussed themselves exhaustively before luncheon, they were now ripe to talk about their fathers. Celia said positively:

"Father will be horrid."

"He doesn't like me."

"Larry darling, he simply doesn't see you. You are not upon his horizon. I have noticed that when he does speak to you his eyes have a blank look."

"What can I do, Celia, to make him look at me?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Last Sunday I caught him looking at that bounding Tommy Loring just as I should love to see him looking at you. Tommy has marked me for his own. I believe he has had the cheek to speak to father about it."

"I am quite sure of it. I should like to put my mark on Loring."

She glanced round, and then pressed his hand.

"You leave things to me, Larry. It's unfortunate that our daddies hate each other, but there it is. I am always conscious of their veiled hostility."

"'Veiled hostility' is good."

"I got it out of the morning paper. I thought things were mending a bit, but the Ming Vase has ——"

"Queered our pitch?"

"Exactly."

"They are both quite dotty about china. It ought to be a bond between them, but alas! it isn't. Father invited your father here to see him squirm."

Larry said mournfully: "I know he did. And the old man knows it. But he had to come. And he will come again. Of course I shall come with him. Meanwhile, I suppose, we must dissemble."

After more discussion it was agreed that nothing else was possible.

The Mistertons, *père et fils*, came three times within the next fortnight. Old Misterton was compiling an immense treatise upon Oriental Porcelain, beginning with the Sung and Yuan dynasties and ending —well, in the opinion of Larry, the *magnum opus* would never be ended! The volumes were to be copiously illustrated. Sir Henry chuckled when his rival craved leave to make a water-colour drawing of the Ming Vase. He said to his daughter:

"The poor old dodderer can't keep away from it."

Celia replied with slight asperity:

"I see nothing of the dodderer in Mr. Misterton. He is a very kind and considerate father."

Sir Henry raised his eyebrows. Celia may have blushed, the faintest tinge of pink. Sir Henry observed coldly:

"I dare say as much could be said of a hedgehog. I have not noticed young Misterton particularly."

"I wish you would, to please me."

"Why?"

"Because I like him."

She was not dissembling, but she really thought she was. Sir Henry frowned; then he said with finality:

"I am not aware that young Misterton has done anything to deserve notice. Pray inform me if he has."

Celia simply shrugged her pretty shoulders. What is being recorded was before the war. Larry, as a subaltern, had played polo for his regiment. Sir Henry, who was no horseman, would not have been impressed. Celia knew this and discreetly held her tongue.

IV

A week later, upon a midsummer's evening, the catastrophe took place. Sir Henry strolled from the lawn into his drawing-room. The windows were open as usual. Celia and he had dined together. After dinner they had walked through the garden as far as the river. On the lawn, father and daughter separated. Celia entered the house by a side entrance and went to her bedroom. She was feeling slightly upset, because her father had selected as a topic Tommy Loring. Tommy, so Celia learned, would spend a month with them in Scotland, upon the moor and forest which Sir Henry leased annually from a ducal magnate.

Sir Henry gazed about him with justifiable pride. Everything in the room had been bought with money made by him. Many of the precious objects were, so to speak, milestones upon the high-road of his progress from comparative obscurity to the position which he now adorned.

Daylight was fading, so he switched on the electrics. Instantly he saw what had happened. The Ming Vase had disappeared. As instantly, Sir Henry leaped to the conclusion that it had been stolen, and the balmy thought descended on him that he was insured against burglars and fire. He advanced a couple of steps. Something caught his eye upon the lovely Persian rug. He gasped his dismay and consternation.

The Ming Vase lay in fragments upon the rug! And he was not insured against breakage. Nobody but his housekeeper dusted the porcelain in the drawing-room. He could trust her; he had trusted her for some fifteen years.

He picked up the pieces and looked at them. He remembered that a fanatic had shattered the incomparable Portland Vase in the British Museum. Today, it stood as of yore, put together by a cunning craftsman, a thing resurrected from the dead, but—to Sir Henry—it was half dead, a cripple, and an abomination in his sight.

The strong man groaned aloud in his agony.

Then he pulled himself together and rang the bell. An inquisition followed. Sir Henry, stern and inexorable as Torquemada, sat upon a couch with the remains of the vase beside him, decently covered with a silk handkerchief. Everybody in his household, from butler to scullerymaid, was interrogated in turn. Each, in his or her turn, pleaded innocence and ignorance. Obviously, the catastrophe had taken place during dinner. After dinner was announced—so the head housemaid testified—she had "tidied up" as usual. She swore that she had seen the Ming Vase

conspicuous in its pride of place. Apparently nobody else had entered the drawing-room.

Sir Henry dismissed the servants. He was alone with Celia. In a tone which he reserved for family prayers and Divine worship, he said solemnly :

" An enemy hath done this thing."

" What do you mean, father ? "

" Envy and jealousy have destroyed something unique."

" Please explain."

" Adam Misterton finished his drawing of the vase last week. He, or some paid minion of his, has wrought this evil. I am sure of it."

" Father ! "

" I repeat—I am sure of it."

Celia opened her mouth and then closed it. Protest, for the moment, would be fatuous. In crises, such as this, her father occupied what he called a *position*, a position deemed impregnable by him until it was taken, when with superb resource he would occupy another peak even more inaccessible than the first. She choked down her unspoken words and went back to her room.

Next morning, early, Sir Henry called in a private detective. There is every reason to suppose that he was capable and intelligent, but he came to a conclusion which exasperated his employer.

The vase, he suggested, must have been knocked down by accident, probably by some underservant who dared not confess the truth. The hypothesis that Adam Misterton, or his son, or some person in their pay, would maliciously destroy a famous work of art was dismissed as unthinkable. This opinion,

received with an angry snort by Sir Henry, was further fortified when the private detective learnt that the Mistertons, at the time the vase was broken, could establish an alibi. Father and son had spent that week-end at Folkestone. All the gentlemen who write for the Press upon art subjects shared the detective's view-point. Personal friends of Sir Henry declared at their clubs that the great collector was making a star-spangled ass of himself.

In due course the gross accusation brought by an angry man against the Mistertons reached the ear of Larry. At first he ridiculed it. Then he managed to meet Celia, who, shamefacedly, admitted the truth.

"But he's quite mad!" exclaimed Larry.

"On this point—yes."

"I suppose he knows that we might bring an action for libel!"

"Oh, Larry!"

"Don't worry. We shall do nothing of the sort. But I mean to see your father all the same, and have it out with him."

"And that will mean appalling ructions. He'll order you out of the house. And, anyway, he'll rock with rage at the sight of you. I feel so unhappy."

Larry kissed and comforted her. But he told her that the matter couldn't be side-tracked. He intended to find out the name of the person who broke the vase. How? For the moment he couldn't answer that question. He must set his wits to work. Celia could help him. She might coax the truth out of some frightened maid. Celia, however, assured him that this plan had occurred to her. Further

inquisition would result in every servant leaving the establishment. She had this information at first-hand from her own maid. Larry suggested that a gardener might have nipped into the drawing-room, picked up the precious vase, and dropped it. But Celia was quite positive that no gardeners were in the garden on Sunday evening. Finally, suspicion lingered upon the family cat—a superb Persian.

V

Joe Quinney read of the disaster in an evening paper. He was tremendously upset. So much so that he called next morning upon Sir Henry, at his offices in the City. Sir Henry, warned by his solicitor to be careful, recited the facts and withheld comment on them. Quinney offered to have the vase put together by the cleverest hands in the kingdom. Sir Henry consented to this, and within twenty-four hours the "remains" were reverently laid upon a table in Quinney's house. The famous dealer allowed no one to touch them except himself. He examined the fractures with his pocket-glass, and then whistled softly. Then he wrapped up one precious bit and took it to Adam Misterton. The old connoisseur examined it with trembling fingers. Quinney, also, was deeply moved, but not for the same reasons. His bright eyes sparkled with excitement. Adam Misterton said slowly:

"You've heard the story, Joe?"

"What story, Mr. Misterton?"

"That dunderheaded idiot believes that I am personally responsible for this awful tragedy."

Quinney, too concerned at all times in minding his own business, had not heard any gossip. He gave a loud guffaw, and then said excitedly :

" What do you make of that fracture, Mr. Misterton ? "

We will spare the lay mind what the expert said. He held forth learnedly upon the wonderful paste, the translucent glaze, the enamels, and so forth. Quinney waxed restless.

" Yes, yes ; but look at the fracture itself."

" I am looking at it, my good man."

Quinney put his hand into his pocket and produced a small broken bit of blue-and-white Kang He. He said sorrowfully :

" A tragedy in our family, Mr. Misterton. Compare the two bits."

Adam Misterton did so, puzzled by Quinney's voice and manner. Quinney rubbed his hands and purred his satisfaction. His vanity as an expert was being agreeably tickled by another expert's seeming want of intelligence. He held the two bits of porcelain edge to edge.

" This," he said triumphantly, touching the blue-and-white piece, " was broken a few days since. This," he touched the Ming bit, " was broken long ago ; years and years ago, I should say."

Misterton gasped in astonishment.

" By Jove ! you are right. What does it mean ? "

" It means," replied the little man solemnly, " that this affair is a comedy, not a tragedy. The Ming Vase you bid for is still intact. I'll lay my life, and I think —I think," he added, sinking his voice to a whisper,

"that I can lay my hands on it. A very clever trick has been played upon a pompous fool, and there is one man in the trade who could have engineered the fraud. He did *me* down to rights once. Now, perhaps, I shall do *him* down."

"But, hang it, this is the real thing."

"I always said there were two of 'em. This is t'other. Now, Mr. Misterton, you can't help me, but your son can. Would he be good enough to step round to my place this evening?"

"I'll see to it that he does. You are a very remarkable man, Joe."

"So I tell my wife."

VI

Larry duly weighed in at the house in Soho Square. Quinney led him to his sanctuary. Upon a small table stood a Waterford glass decanter filled with port worthy of it. Quinney filled two glasses and proposed a toast:

"Frustrate their knavish tricks!"

Larry sipped his wine. Quinney spoke at length:

"There's a lot of wrong 'uns in our trade, Mr. Larry. Some of 'em sit in Chippendale chairs and drink port nearly as good as this. Now, first and last, I ain't going to mention names unless I have to. You can take it from me that I know all the dirty dogs who might have worked this game. I don't love them, and they don't love me. More, they may watch me, but they won't watch you. Can you go down into Devon to-morrow?"

"I can, and I will. I don't want to mention names, either, Mr. Quinney; but there's a young lady con-

cerned in this affair. It means more to me than you think."

"Good! When we've finished our wine I'll give you a cigar. I dare say you're a fisherman."

Larry admitted modestly that he belonged to the chuck-and-chance-it school, not the dry-fly academy.

"That's it. There's a nice little trout stream where you're going. I want you to chuck a lot of quiet questions about when you ain't chuckin' flies. You must get acquainted with the lady to whom the Ming Vase belonged. If she can't answer your questions, come back here, and we'll try somewhere else. You must take the lady into your confidence. Otherwise, she might fib. The best of 'em do it. This is what I want to know. The lady's great-grandmother inherited the Ming Vase. I believe that she inherited two, and one was smashed, either in the old lady's lifetime or in the parson's. Knowing what I do about these country gentry, I believe further that the pieces were saved, put away to be mended, and forgotten. In my own experience this has happened again and again with valuable china, and, mind you, they knew that the china was valuable. There wasn't a dealer at the auction who didn't say to me: 'Where's the twin, Joe?' And I made up my mind to run down to Devon myself, but I was too busy, and the idea slipped out of my mind. I'll bet a new hat that some dealer did run down, not a swell, but a jackal, one of the 'rappers.'"

"Rappers?" repeated Larry.

"Your father's son ought to know what a 'rapper' is—a feller as raps at all doors, on the hunt for what may lay behind 'em. Every dealer must employ

them. I say that a 'rapper' rapped at a certain door in North Devon, and that he took away with him what Sir Henry found on his carpet, what's lying this minute on that table."

Larry was much impressed.

"And then?" he asked.

"Ah! When you think how fine porcelain does talk of the past—by gum!—and when you think what those bits yonder say to such an expert as your father, it is a pity—isn't it?—that they can't tell us what happened in the last month. But I'll tell you what happened when you come back. Have a cigar?"

Larry accepted a superb Corona. As he squeezed the end of it, he said hesitatingly:

"If it is as you surmise, Mr. Quinney, I am rather surprised that Miss Carey should part with the broken bits. She might have sent them to Christie's."

"Of course she might, but the fact sticks out that she didn't."

"Obviously, she didn't."

"Now, whether or no you hear anything about broken bits, I want you to ask more questions in the ale-houses. Drop in casual, and talk to the women. Find out if a rapper has been about. No rapper who knows his job will leave any place without nosing round the cottages. That's all for the present."

"Tell me where you think the Ming Vase is?"

"Not yet. I'll tell you where it will be if we don't get a move on—in Yankeeland. The Yanks pay the big prices for Oriental stuff, and some of 'em ask no questions."

Soon afterwards Larry took his leave.

VII

When he rang Miss Carey's bell, an aged handmaiden opened the door. Larry asked politely if Miss Carey was at home, and was answered, as politely, in the affirmative. He was shown into a little parlour fragrant of lavender, and filled with comfortable old-fashioned furniture. After one glance at the kind, smiling face of his hostess, Larry stated candidly the nature of his errand. Miss Carey replied as candidly. So far as she knew there had been but one Ming Vase. She was quite certain that her father had never mentioned the existence of another. Larry was unable to disguise his disappointment. Miss Carey said quietly:

"You may be sure, Mr. Misterton, that I should not have sold the broken bits to any importunate stranger. Indeed, under the circumstances, I should have had them put together, and kept the restored vase as a cherished souvenir."

"Just so," said Larry. "I expect I have come on a fool's errand."

He went back to the comfortable tavern where he had found good board and lodging and plenty of Devonshire cream. He ate the two trout which he had caught in the morning, according to instructions. After dinner, he sat in the bar and talked about fishing. The talk soon turned upon stag-hunting. Larry glimpsed an opportunity and then clutched it.

"Hunting is in the blood of all of us. If we can't hunt animals we hunt things. Postage-stamps, for instance, or prints, or bits of pottery."

The landlord of the tavern rose like a fat trout

at a Mayfly. He told the story of the Ming Vase at great length. Others chipped in. Larry listened attentively. Nobody present had seen the vase. After its discovery, naturally enough, every house and cottage in the locality had been looked carefully over in the hope of discovering other treasures—a fruitless quest. All the same, objects of no great value had been salted down in dusty corners by enterprising dealers.

"*Salted down?*"

The landlord grinned. The others chuckled, thinking the affair a huge joke. Yes, dealers had brought wares to the cottagers. Finding nothing, and abhorring a vacuum, they had obeyed the fundamental law that supply creates demand. Already, so the landlord affirmed, there was a brisk demand by trippers for the old family brass and oak and pottery which drifted into those parts after the sale of the Ming Vase.

Thus far our amateur detective travelled—and no farther. It was certain that rappers had come to the village, and rapped at all doors, but in their hunt for "bits" they seemed, to a man, to have drawn blank.

Next morning Larry went fishing again in too bright weather. He returned at midday with an empty creel, and called for a time-table. It was brought to him, together with a three-cornered note from Miss Carey. The lady hoped that Mr. Misterton would call during the afternoon as she had something of interest to communicate.

Was Quinney right, after all?

Miss Carey's face indicated suppressed excitement

as Larry shook her delicate hand. She begged him to be seated.

"After you had gone," she began, "I happened to remember an old desk, belonging to my great-grandmother. In it is a list of her china. I am ashamed to say I never read it carefully. I never thought of it till you raised the question of the two vases."

She took up a faded thin sheet of notepaper, and read aloud:

"One pair of jars, blue, with painted birds, which my father brought from Canton. *Nota bene:* One is sadly chipped."

"The Ho-Ho birds!" exclaimed Larry.

"There is no mention," continued Miss Carey, "of any other vase even remotely resembling my vase. I never heard of the other vase. I never heard my father say that there was another vase. But this evidence is conclusive."

"You can bet your life on it, Miss Carey."

"I should not be prepared to hazard that, Mr. Misterton, but it is likely, I think, that the vase was broken before my mother died, a long time ago, and that she, a most careful woman, preserved the pieces. But who, who, I ask you, would have sold these pieces?"

"Your servant?" hazarded Larry, too impetuously.

Miss Carey frowned. In a cold, austere tone she informed the young man that Deborah, her aged handmaiden, was incapable of selling anything that did not belong to her. Larry apologized so pleasantly that harmony was restored immediately. His wits moved nimbly. He even hazarded another conjec-

ture. When Miss Carey had moved out of the vicarage there must have been a general clearance of rubbish. Miss Carey bowed. Possibly, indeed probably, a basketful of broken china had been thrown to the void of a dust-heap? Miss Carey replied by ringing for Deborah.

"I will put the matter discreetly," she assured Larry.

Deborah, like most ancient retainers, seemed to remember everything that was irrelevant. During a life-long service, she had never really noticed the Ming Vase. There might have been two of them—she couldn't say. Yes—a lot of rubbish had been thrown away, but not by her. Of course, a charwoman had been called in. Mrs. Rockley, who lived hard by, a most respectable woman, keeping herself to herself, not at all likely to have dealings with strange men.

Much baffled, Larry returned to his tavern. The great fact of there having been two vases was established. He called upon Mrs. Rockley, and was not favourably impressed. When he asked questions her thin mouth set like a trap. His eagle eye, however, saw some Staffordshire ware upon her mantelpiece, and a faked oak chest in a corner of the sitting-room. From her manner he became convinced that she must have had dealings with a "rapper." From the landlord of his inn he gleaned another bit of information. Mrs. Rockley was the mother of a ne'er-do-well. Her savings had been spent by him. Finally, Larry elicited another fact of importance. The spendthrift son was in funds just about a week after the sale of the Ming Vase!

Larry went back to London. Quinney listened to his tale, chuckling and rubbing his hands. When Larry finished his modest recital, the famous dealer said, with strange irrelevance :

" Mr. Julius Opstein is in London."

Larry had never heard of the gentleman. Quinney, still chuckling, told him that Opstein was a New York dealer with a very unsavoury reputation. Originally Opstein had done business in London, where the Metropolitan Police had interested themselves in his activities. Long ago, so Quinney added, one of Opstein's " crowd " had " man-handled " Quinney himself.

" I was buyin' against Opstein," said Quinney, " and he hired a ' knocker-out ' to punch me silly. I was left senseless on a Turkey carpet, with a lovely black eye. Now, Mr. Misterton, I believe that Opstein has worked this game. For why ? He was at the auction. He smelt out the second vase, and I'll bet he bought the bits from this Mrs. Rockley. From what you tell me, she's just the sort to take all rubbish to her own cottage, to look it over carefully. That's an old game with charwomen. Now come with me."

He led Larry into a small workshop kept for very particular jobs. Upon a table stood the Ming Vase.

" You've got it ? " exclaimed Larry.

" Nice piece of work, ain't it ? But one o' the vases, you tell me, was sadly chipped. Look at that."

Then Larry saw that this was the broken vase put together miraculously. *And it was sadly chipped.*

" What's the next move ? " asked Larry.

"Checkmate, I hope, and I shall make it. I've never forgotten that black eye. The fact, carefully noted down, that the second vase was badly chipped puts into my hand the club I want. I shall use it before dinner-time. Call again to-morrow morning."

VIII

Next day, when Larry reached Soho Square, one glance at Joe Quinney's face was enough.

"By Jove! you have it!" exclaimed the young man.

"By gum! I have, and in the very nick of time, too. Sit you down, Mr. Larry. I've just 'phoned for Sir Henry Brockenhurst."

He led the way upstairs to his wonderful sanctuary. Upon the Cipriani table, his most beloved possession, side by side, stood the two Ming Vases. At a short distance it was impossible to tell the cripple from the other. Quinney obstinately refused to answer questions. He would unfold his tale when Sir Henry arrived, and not before.

Before he came Quinney put the unbroken vase out of sight."

When Sir Henry entered he bowed coldly to Larry. Obviously he was not expecting to see him. He examined the restored vase, and expressed his thanks and obligations to Quinney.

"You identify it as your vase?" asked Quinney.

"Certainly. One or two small fragments are missing, but the thing is unique."

Quinney chuckled. Then, with a superb gesture, he held aloft the real One and Only.

"What is this?" gasped Sir Henry.

"If you are quite, quite sure, Sir Henry, that the restored vase is yours, I think I shall be justified in claiming this intact specimen as mine. I got possession of it with difficulty and at some risk to myself."

Sir Henry, for the first time in his life, confessed himself confounded. He wiped his forehead with a large silk handkerchief and fixed a pair of slightly congested eyes upon Quinney, who, in theatrical parlance, "took the stage." He tapped the Ming Vase, listening appreciatively to the sonorous ring of the porcelain.

"This is your vase," he said quietly, "and I restore it to you with this remark: You owe its recovery to young Mr. Misterton and me."

Sir Henry looked even more bewildered. Quinney continued:

"I saw that the fractures of the broken vase were not fresh. That set my mind to working. I knew that these vases were invariably made in pairs. The lady who sold the vase had inherited it from her great-grandmother. Young Mr. Misterton went down to Pudcombe Regis. There he made two discoveries of the utmost importance. A list of the great-grandmother's china was found in a desk. She had inherited two vases, and in the list was a note calling attention to the fact that one was sadly chipped. Mr. Larry Misterton also discovered that 'rappers' had been ransacking the cottages in Pudcombe Regis, amongst them the cottage of the charwoman who had cleared out the rubbish in the vicarage, when Miss Carey left it. On that information I acted.

A certain Julius Opstein, of New York, is in London."

"I have had dealings with Julius Opstein," said Sir Henry.

"Then you have had dealings with a man who began life as a receiver of stolen goods. I butted up against him when I first started in London. One of his crowd blacked my left eye—by gum!—and left me senseless upon a Turkey carpet. I swore then to get even some day. I have always kept an eye on Opstein, the one that was blacked. He has half-a-dozen scoundrels working for him in this country. One of them must have bought the broken bits from the charwoman, and paid her well to hold her tongue. Possibly the same fellow, after studying the habits of your household, slipped from the shrubberies into your drawing-room and copped your vase whilst you were at dinner, leaving the broken bits on the Persian mat. A very soft job! Just after you thought your vase had been smashed I was insuring some porcelain with a big firm that handles such business. By the sheer luck o' things I learnt that Opstein had insured a Ming Vase. You know, Sir Henry, that it isn't easy to insure valuable porcelain. The knowing ones want a squint at it. Opstein had to show the vase to an expert. I had it from him that it was a real gem, with Ho-Ho birds painted on it. That set me thinking. One week ago I discovered that Opstein was sailing for New York to-day. I guessed that he would take the vase with him. He might break it himself and claim the insurance, or he might place it somewhere in America. Last night I went to his rooms. I asked to see the vase; he refused me.

Then I knew that I was right. He tried to bluff me. I gave him five minutes—no more. He had to choose between me and the police. Maybe I was compounding a felony? I don't know, and I don't care. In the end he weakened, as these fellows always do. We are now quits. That's all!"

Sir Henry drew himself up, as if he were addressing a board of directors. He said blandly:

"I am under the greatest obligation to you, Mr. Quinney, and to you, my dear young sir."

He smiled almost paternally at Larry. Then, he added, majestically:

"Had I suspected that this was a case of robbery I should have offered an adequate reward. I am prepared to pay that reward."

"Not to me," said Quinney. "What I did, Sir Henry, I did out of pure hate."

"What I did," added Larry boldly, "was done for pure love."

Sir Henry stared at Larry.

"What do you mean, Larry? If you will allow me to call you so after the great service you have rendered me."

"Certainly," said Larry. "Are you dining alone to-night, Sir Henry?"

"I am dining with my daughter as usual."

"May I join you? After dinner, when Miss Brockenhurst has left us, I will explain what I mean."

"We dine at eight, my boy. I shall be delighted to see you."

Quinney picked up the restored vase.

"To whom does this belong?"

Nobody answered the question. Quinney caressed the incomparable cripple.

" I think," he said, " that it belongs to me. But I propose to adjust the matter satisfactorily with Miss Carey."

Duds

I

JOE QUINNEY called himself a patron of the Drama, although he had no stomach for "highbrow" plays, which left, so he affirmed, a "sourish taste in the mouth." Susan, his wife (the daughter of a woman born and brought up as a Nonconformist), accompanied her lord and master to the theatre only when he received complimentary tickets. She held it to be "sinful" to pay seven-and-six for a seat in the dress circle.

Since the war Joe received many "complimentaries," because stage managers came to Soho Square to hire "props." Moreover Joe would undertake with enthusiasm the reproduction of old "bits," and was regarded by the profession as "knowledgable" about needlework and tapestries. Susan sniffed at services not too highly remunerated, because Joe made no charge for giving an opinion. She knew that he would leave important business to dart down to a theatre, and she cocked a dubious eye at photographs of leading ladies, gratefully and indeed affectionately "autographed."

"Play-hussies!" she would say.

"Good sorts, all of 'em," replied Joe cheerfully.

The dealer was in a west-country town, when an adventure befell him. A poster informed him that a somewhat sentimental comedy was "on tour" in the provinces, with an all-round London Company. Joe accepted this statement for what it was worth—*nothing*. Not a name on the bill was familiar. But the "show" had enjoyed a long run in the metropolis. Joe, remembering that he had laughed and cried over it, decided that the provinces would fairly "eat" it. He knew, also, that this must be a Number 2 Company. Number 1 would have the monopoly of the big northern towns.

He bought a front seat, not hearing so clearly as of yore, dined well, and prepared to enjoy himself.

To his dismay the house, when the curtain went up, was barely half full, and those in the stalls near himself smelt of "paper."

"Bad biz," he murmured, as he glanced at the programme.

"Done on the cheap," was his second reflection.

And then he forgot play and players.

It happened that he had supplied some of the furniture for the London production, mostly fakes. As a matter of fact fakes look more convincing on the stage than the genuine articles. The setting of the first act called, according to the author's directions, for taste and distinction. The owner of a handsome flat in Mayfair was supposed to be a connoisseur in articles of vertu. Joe had laboured lovingly and not in vain to achieve the right atmosphere.

Now—he was horrified.

He guessed that an impoverished management, travelling with barest necessaries, trusted to finding

" stuff " in the curiosity shops of the towns wherein they played.

Joe's disgusted eyes wandered here and there, till they rested spell-bound upon a very ugly bowl.

" Is it the goods ? "

" I beg your pardon," said a shabby lady next to him.

Joe apologized, explaining that, inadvertently, he had spoken aloud. He pressed faithless lips together, trembling with excitement. Was a " find " in full sight ? It was too early to answer this question. After the show, by hook or crook, he would take a squint at the bowl, probably a reproduction.

Meanwhile, he might as well pay attention to the acting.

A young woman was playing the lead adequately, but hers was a fool-proof part, like Peg in " Peg o' my Heart." It played itself, given certain physical attributes in the actress.

" Good enough to fill this house," thought Joe. Being no mean critic, he decided that the leading man, a black-avised gentleman—lacked ginger.

" No pep," he murmured.

Why——? Pep had captivated the town. Why was it absent in the country ?

The second curtain fell without a " hand."

At the end of the performance, however, genuine applause was bestowed upon the young actress. She came forward, smiling pathetically. Joe clapped vigorously. It occurred to him that Miss Verity Verequer needed a round of beef more than a round of applause. What would Susan say, if, greatly daring, he offered a play-hussy solid refreshment.

Turning this over in a kindly mind, he pushed through the crowd and slipped round to the stage-door.

II

His business card, and the statement that he had supplied props to the London theatre, challenged attention. Within a minute or two he was shown into the dressing-room of the actor-manager, Mr. Desmond Trelawny.

"I can't offer you a drink," said Mr. Trelawny, "because the one and only bottle is empty."

"I can offer you a cigar," said Joe pleasantly.

In his hot youth, haste had defeated him disastrously. With the cigar he tendered sympathy, dear to all artists, whatever their degree.

"Not a good house."

"Rotten, Mr. Quinney."

"Miss Verequer gave a fine performance."

"I should like you to meet her presently. This is our joint show. We run it, I mean."

"It's running you, by gum!" thought Quinney.

Mr. Trelawny, beneath the soothing influence of the best cigar he had smoked in six months, told a tale of woe. He had depleted too small a working capital in securing the small-town touring rights of a popular success. He was under-staffed. Quinney listened to the old, old story, entitled: "Biting off More than you can Chew!"

He said carelessly:

"Picked up your props here, eh?"

"Nearly all of them. Won't talk to you about *them*, Mr. Quinney."

"Always did hate rubbish."

"Props don't make a play, sir."

"Um! Take a look at 'em to-morrow. One or two fellows in this town, if I spoke a word, could do you better."

"You are very kind."

They talked on till Miss Verequer was summoned. She flitted in, without make-up, pale and thin, but beguiling. Was she Trelawny's wife? Quinney saw no circlet of bondage upon her left hand.

"Can't you two have some oysters and stout with me?" he asked.

Trelawny nodded; Verity smiled. Quinney named a place known to him, snug and at hand. Then he bustled away to order something to follow the oysters.

"Babes in the wood," he muttered.

The civil war that rages between persons and things distracted him. His thoughts dwelt upon the ugly bowl to which he dared not call particular attention. But Verity's face reminded him oddly of Susan after the birth of her baby, when she had so nearly slipped out of the world.

"Up against it. Damn!"

He ordered something more digestible than beef to follow the oysters, and secured a private room.

The partners soon appeared, prepared to enjoy themselves, but, inevitably, they talked shop. The company, so Quinney learned, was on the ragged edge of disaster. Mr. Trelawny indicted himself. Miss Verequer, it appeared, might have scintillated as a "star" in Number One Company. She had understudied the London actress, who took care that her

understudy remained "off." At the moment she had an "offer." If she consulted her own interests, she would leave a company almost on the rocks, and accept the substance of a fixed salary instead of the shadow of half profits in a derelict concern.

But Quinney was unable to determine whether Trelawny was speaking in his own interests or hers. Did he really want her to dissolve partnership?

"What do you advise, Mr. Quinney?"

"I ain't a oner for giving advice."

"You know the world, sir."

"Blowed if I do! Not your world anyway."

"Cut a loss, I say."

"Very sound."

Here Verity broke in:

"We aren't beat yet, Mr. Quinney. We ought to make good with such a play. It's a winner everywhere, a sure thing."

Quinney nodded. It was a sure thing with the right cast, and he said as much.

"Can't afford that," growled Trelawny.

Verity sighed.

"We haven't struck the best towns yet," she murmured.

Soon afterwards the party broke up. Quinney promised Trelawny to drop into the theatre next morning about eleven.

III

Within five minutes of walking into the property room, Quinney had the bowl in his hand. It was of thickest porcelain, black outside, with white prunus decoration. It was difficult to date it. If genuine,

it might be deemed worthy of a place in the Salting Collection. Quinney told himself that experts would quarrel over it.

"Where did you get this?"

Trelawny enlightened him.

"It belongs to a small dealer in this town. Is it any good?"

"I don't know," replied Quinney cautiously.

"Thick stuff—can't break it."

He took the bowl from Quinney's hand, laughed and threw it into the air, catching it with one hand. Perspiration started on the dealer's brow.

"I wouldn't do that," he suggested. "It might be a bit of Ming."

Trelawny had never heard of Ming. He replaced the bowl and drew Joe aside:

"I want to talk to you about Miss Verequer. Have you ever had a flutter in our line?"

"Never."

"Excuse me for asking." Quinney nodded. "I know, of course, that you're in with the profesh, and I thought it possible that a square business proposition might appeal to you."

"Ah!" said Joe lightly.

Mr. Trelawny led the dealer to his dressing-room, and Quinney's sharp eyes detected a full bottle of whisky.

"One hundred pounds, sir, would turn this show into a winner."

"Really?" said Quinney. He was thinking of the bowl, but he listened patiently to Mr. Trelawny.

"With a hundred I could push the advertising department."

Quinney said sharply :

" You ain't asking me to lend you a hundred, hay ? "

" Certainly not. But one hundred, spot cash, is not much to pay for a one-third interest in such a show as this."

" Maybe not," said Quinney.

" Miss Verequer can make it go with proper support."

" Find another leading man," was on Joe's lips.

" If we crash it will break her little heart."

Again Quinney nodded. The more he saw of Mr. Desmond Trelawny the less he liked him, but the dealer, as we know, was a man of prejudice, quick to form judgments not invariably sound.

" Such a nice little heart, too," said Quinney.

" I wish I could tempt you, sir."

" You can't. I've burnt my fingers attending strictly to my own business. Nothing doing—on the outside."

A minute later they parted. Chance, or the Gods, ordained that Quinney should meet Verity as he turned into the main street.

" Are you going to the theatre ? "

" No. I thought of looking at the cathedral."

" May I show it to you ? "

" Do, please."

They strolled leisurely into the Close and sat down to warm themselves beneath an April sun. Quinney wasted no time. For the moment the bowl flew out of his head. He saw a pensive, pathetic face under a picture hat.

"I was asked for advice last night. I didn't give it."

Something in his tone arrested attention. Verity looked up at him, interrogatively.

"*You* ought to cut this loss—cut and run!"

"Oh, my dear!"

It was an expression she used in the play tellingly.

"Yes," continued Quinney, "you're up against it. Tell me, who is Mr. Desmond Trelawny?"

"His real name is Adolph Cohen."

"I mean what is he to you that you should consider his interests as against your own?"

"But—I don't. He is my business partner."

"Nothing else, hay?"

She remained silent, not resenting the abrupt question, but with a deepening blush upon her cheeks.

"Something between 'em," thought Quinney savagely. Then, without pausing to pick his words, he went on:

"Just now, at the theatre, Mr. Trelawny offered me a one-third interest in your show for a hundred, cash."

"Well——?" she murmured demurely.

Was she a baggage, fencing with him? The blush had faded, leaving her cheeks paler than ever.

"I declined the proposition."

"Why?"

"Not my line. See?"

She nodded. Joe went on tentatively:

"You believe in this show?"

"Indeed I do. I can make good in it."

"You have. The trouble is not with you, and I expect you know it. You knocked 'em last night,

but the Trelawny man unpicked all your stitches. As a manager he may know his job. Come now, is it possible to make that plain to him ? "

" No."

" Then, I repeat—cut and run ! "

" But I'm pledged, Mr. Quinney, to—to stick it out. It would be so mean to run away. Aren't you going to take me into the cathedral ? "

IV

Quinney lunched alone, writhing upon the thorns of indecision. He had arrived, by mental processes essentially his own, at two convictions. Verity was all right ; Trelawny was all wrong. Trelawny had a hold upon an innocent creature.

That afternoon he examined even more carefully the black bowl, not in Mr. Trelawny's presence. More, he scraped acquaintance with the property man. Property men, for ever handling fakes, recognize them as such, even when camouflaged in blue serge suits. From the property man Joe gleaned the information he was after. The name of the owner of the black bowl.

To that dealer he hurried.

Nobody knew better than Quinney that treasures may be found in queer places, and the rarer specimens of Early Oriental have been so found by a few experts. Country dealers have general knowledge. When they buy a " bit " they can't appraise, they send it to somebody " who knows."

" It's a fake, Mr. Quinney. Lor', sir, I thought as how you'd 'ave known that."

"All my life," declared Quinney solemnly, "I've been scared stiff over this early stuff. And I hate it, because it's ugly. Now, carry on, my lad."

The bowl, it seemed, had travelled to the British Museum—and back. Its owner said mournfully: "If it wasn't a fake, I'd a customer who offered five 'underd guineas. Think of it, Mr. Quinney."

"I'd rather not," said Joe. "What do you ask for it?"

"What would you give, sir? No reasonable offer refused."

"Nothing," snapped Quinney. "But, if any fool happens along and takes a fancy to the beastly thing let him have it for a couple of quid."

With that, Joe returned to his hotel. He might have returned to Soho Square and his faithful Susan, but Verity had cast a spell upon him. He wanted to see her act again. And curiosity concerning Mr. Desmond Trelawny ravaged his brain cells. What was Verity to him, or he to Verity?

Information comes to those who seek it diligently. At his own hotel, he met a gentleman connected with the Profession, who, strangely enough, wished to form his own opinion of Verity's acting. He had come west for no other purpose. Putting two and two together, Quinney decided that this gentleman might possibly have made the "offer" referred to at supper. Anyway he knew about Mr. Trelawny.

"A wrong 'un. He has that little girl under his thumb. He was clever enough to spot her as a winner, and fool enough to believe that he could play with her. That's where he slipped up. She's the goods; he isn't. A kidder from Kidderville. He's

kidded her, poor child, into taking him at his own valuation. A good-looking, plausible rascal. Likely as not, she'll marry him, but he won't marry her till she makes a hit. That's that, Mr. Quinney."

"More rubbish," remarked Quinney.

V

He sat again in a front seat, and surrendered unconditionally to Verity's charm. She charmed the audience. And it was obvious to Quinney that Trelawny charmed nobody. If Joe had spoken aloud his thoughts, the ladies near him would have left the theatre!

The gentleman connected with the Profession joined Quinney after the performance. He, too, was savage.

"She's queered by him."

"You bet."

These two smoked a cigar together before going to bed. Quinney learned that his companion—as he surmised—had made an offer to Verity.

He said querulously:

"She won't accept it."

Quinney observed tartly: "Trelawny offered me a one-third interest for a hundred down."

"You don't say——! I'd plank down double if he'd sell his interest and clear."

They puffed at their cigars.

"What," asked Quinney, alertly, "would he take to clear, lock, stock and barrel?"

"You can search me."

"Make a guess."

"Well, he's in Short Street. If a monkey was dangled in front of him, he'd take it, and we shouldn't see his heels for dust."

"Five hundred quid," murmured Quinney. "It's a lot of money."

"The situation here could be saved, Mr. Quinney. I could lay my hands in two jiffs upon the right man. But we're tackling a woman sweet upon the wrong man. Nothing doing."

"Not a thing," growled Quinney.

He lay awake wrestling with the problem. He put it to himself in concrete form: Is it possible to whirl asunder a man and a woman, the one linked by love and the other by self-interest?

As the cathedral clock was chiming midnight a solution came to a very exasperated man.

Next morning, he made a capital breakfast, and then sought out his theatrical acquaintance.

"Are you sure that you could clap hands upon the right chap to play lead?"

"Lord! Yes. I know half a dozen. Why?"

"I'll try to answer you this time to-morrow."

At eleven he presented himself at the Stage Door. Mr. Desmond Trelawny greeted him affectionately.

"Saw you in front again last night."

"Can you guess why I have interested myself in your props?"

"No."

"Are we tiled in?"

"Abso—lootly."

Quinney lowered his voice.

"What I am about to tell you will be between ourselves?"

"It will, sir."

"Fine——! Amongst your props is a *famille noire* bowl, which you threw into the air yesterday."

Mr. Trelawny became alert. He assumed an expression of unmistakable greed. He remembered that Quinney was an expert of porcelain as well as furniture.

"I'm going to be straight with you," said Quinney. "That bowl may or may not be very valuable. I don't consider myself competent to give an opinion on it beyond that. Now, I want you to buy it from the dealer from whom you hired it with other props. Offer him thirty bob! Don't go beyond two quid. Don't mention my name! Take a receipt."

Metaphorically, Mr. Trelawny licked his lips.

"Right," he said briefly, a word which accorded ill with his appearance at that moment. Then he added tentatively:

"What do you think it's worth, Mr. Quinney?"

"It might be worth five hundred pounds."

"Great Scott——!"

"As you say—Great Scott! If it is worth anything, I'll promise you this—you shall have a share of the loot. The big market for that stuff is America—New York. It might pay me to take that bowl to New York. Have I said enough?"

"More than enough," murmured Mr. Trelawny. "This bangs Banagher! You know I saw the sweat start on your skin when I chucked it into the air yesterday."

"Did you?" said Quinney mildly.

VI

At the theatre, that evening, the leading man was missing. His understudy, George Saxby, took his place at the last moment, and Quinney, seeing the play for the third time, grinned and chuckled. Saxby belonged to the famous theatrical family of that name, but he was young and comparatively speaking inexperienced. He captured a not too critical audience by his sincerity. He made love to the heroine convincingly.

Quinney saw Verity in her dressing-room after the last curtain.

"What has happened?" he asked.

Verity burst into tears. Between sobs, Quinney grasped the facts. Mr. Desmond Trelawny had bolted, leaving the company "on the rocks." There was no money to "carry on," unpaid salaries confronted Miss Verequer.

"Has he bolted to find the ready?" demanded Quinney.

Verity shook her head.

"We shall never see him again," she wailed.

"Good biz!" declared the dealer. He added whimsically: "By the way, that fat ugly black bowl is missing, too."

Verity stared at him.

"We may never see that again," said Quinney. "Now, my dear, dry your eyes. And hold your tongue. Not a word to the company. To-morrow, at ten sharp, a friend of mine—*and of yours*—will meet you here. He is prepared to finance this show. And so am I."

" You, Mr. Quinney ? "

" I like to back a winner now and again . . . George Saxby made a hit."

Her eyes brightened.

" He did, didn't he ? "

Quinney nodded.

" Plenty of pep. Good-night—and don't worry ! "

" Why did you mention that ugly bowl ? "

" Tell you, to-morrow."

Quinney returned to the hotel, where his theatrical friend was awaiting him. Together, they mapped out a campaign. Quinney undertook that the " setting " should be " right." The theatrical gentleman pledged himself to attend to everything else.

Next day was momentous in the fortunes of Miss Verequer. The town, somehow, rallied gallantly to the rescue of a shipwrecked young lady. The local editor smelt " copy." Ask theatrical gentlemen (and publicity agents) how chestnuts are pulled out of the fire ? Probably they will refuse to enlighten you. Suffice it to say that the sudden exit of the leading man provoked, everywhere, wrath and sympathy, in allopathic doses.

A full house greeted our Ariadne with roars of encouragement. She broke down ! Genuine " sob-stuff " ! The women sobbed with her. She smiled through her tears. Everybody laughed.

" You're all right," shouted a stentorian voice from the gallery.

" So is George," piped a spinster in the pit.

George rose to the occasion. He played with a " pep " that astounded nobody more than the theatrical gentleman. He " got there " in Act II.

He put it across!

The theatrical gentleman whispered to Quinney:

"Want to sell your one-third interest at a premium?"

"No," said Quinney. "I'm in this, win or lose. And the Lord knows what my wife will say."

He did not return to Susan. He went on to the next town, a bigger town, where Verity played to "capacity."

Ultimately, Quinney made more than a "monkey."

VII

In the autumn of the same year, the famous dealer found himself in New York. Passing a shop window where a few "antiques" of great price were exhibited, he beheld the *famille noire* bowl enthroned upon an ebony pedestal. A minute later he was chatting with the proprietor of the shop, well-known to him.

"What price that bowl?" asked Quinney.

"It's sold, Mr. Quinney, to one of our big collectors. Five thousand dollars, sir, and—and cheap!"

"Thank you," said Quinney. "I think I have seen it before, but, perhaps, I am mistaken."

Surprises run in couples. That same day Quinney read a panegyric of an accomplished English actor, Mr. Desmond Trelawny—the cadet of an ancient Cornish family—earning a fine salary as villain in a popular melodrama.

After Christmas, when Verity was playing in London, Quinney congratulated her on her approaching marriage with George. Verity laughed.

"I refused your friend's offer because of George.

I—I hated to leave George. I knew that George would make good when his chance came. And that reminds me, Mr. Quinney, you never told me why that hateful man carried off that ugly bowl."

"He bought it for two pounds," said Quinney. "It served as bait."

"Bait?"

"I wanted to lure him from you, my dear."

"But was it valuable?"

"Um!" said Quinney. "A thing is worth what it will fetch. That bowl and Mr. Desmond Trelawny are—duds."

"Duds——?"

"All the same, in little old New York, Verity, they don't quite know everything. And there, my dear, duds sometimes get over."

The D'Avenant Mystery

I

JOE QUINNEY, being somewhat of a pagan, said afterwards that the D'Avenant mystery had been solved by coincidence, but Susan, his wife, brought up in a cathedral town, thought otherwise.

The famous dealer happened to be staying at D'Avenant Old Hall when Lord D'Avenant was found dead in his library. Lord D'Avenant was better known as Mr. Nicholas Davenant, the head of a great firm trading with China and the Malay Archipelago. He bought D'Avenant Old Hall—and assumed the apostrophe of the ancient family—before his elevation to the peerage. Unkind persons affirmed that he was not even remotely of kin to the D'Avenants and that he had paid an immense sum for his title. This was untrue. Nicholas Davenant was the great-grandson of a D'Avenant, and his peerage was given to him because he had used his immense influence in China to obtain for the British Government certain important concessions.

Nevertheless Lord D'Avenant was known and feared in China, where he had spent most of his life, as "Old Nick."

He called upon Quinney shortly after he had bought Old Hall.

"It's full of oak," he told the dealer.

Quinney's eyes brightened. He loved oak.

"In shocking condition," said his lordship testily.

Quinney became alert. He had discovered a process by which painted, stained and over-varnished panels could be restored to their right colour and texture.

"I want you to take it in hand at once."

Quinney chuckled and rubbed his hands.

"With great pleasure, my lord."

"Also I have some very valuable oriental china, a collection of forty years, made on the spot, in China, I mean, and you must find me the right cabinets."

Quinney nodded. He had heard of the Davenant collection, but he had never seen it.

"My collection is unique," said Lord D'Avenant. "I own one piece, Mr. Quinney, which is of a deep blue colour, very thin and intact. It rings like a beautiful glass. Small fragments of this rare porcelain are set as jewels and treasured as such. My bit is more than a thousand years old."

Quinney licked his lips, as he replied solemnly:

"It will be a privilege, my lord, to examine such a gem."

But, alone with Susan, he confessed that he was not favourably impressed by his new patron's appearance.

"Looks like an old vulture, Susie."

"Looks ain't your strong point, Joe," remarked his wife.

Quinney assented cheerfully, staring at his hands, of which he was slightly vain, not without reason.

"Talons, he has, my girl. And such a beak——!

But—brains! More than his rightful share of them. A very cunning and evil old bird!"

"You have nothing to do with him, Joe."

He laughed, and told her what had passed at the first interview.

"If he's a wicked old sinner, I say—walk not in the ways of such."

"Lord love you!" retorted the autocrat of Soho Square, "if I did business with Saints only, me and you, dearie, would be in the pore-house."

He rushed down to D'Avenant, and returned intoxicated with enthusiasm. The oak surpassed expectation, and the work of restoration would exact all energies and undivided personal attention. More —some of the furniture would have to be replaced with period pieces. His lordship had commanded him to hunt up the "right stuff."

"He knows I'm to be trusted, Sue."

"Well, you know he isn't."

"Being a brand-new nobleman, my girl, he has to behave as such. When you become Lady Quinney you'll quit saving string and pinching over stamps. *Noblesse oblige.* This job is going to be a bit of all right."

Again Susan shook her head. Secretly, she had consulted a pack of cards. The omens, in her considered opinion, were distinctly unfavourable.

II

Within a fortnight, Quinney and his craftsmen were comfortably lodged in the ancient house. It stood in a fine park surrounded by a high brick wall.

To Quinney was assigned a bedroom and a sitting-room.

Lord D'Avenant received him on arrival.

A housemaid ushered the dealer into the library, which was on the first floor and the least attractive of many fine reception rooms. The noble owner explained why he had chosen it.

"It's next my bedroom, Mr. Quinney. I'm not a sound sleeper. I do a lot of work when I can't sleep. Nice view—hay?"

An oriel window commanded the main approach. In the diamond panes were escutcheons. Evidently the room had been used as a library for many years. The walls were lined to the ceiling with books bound in faded calf and morocco. One massive door opened on to the corridor; the other led to the bedroom. An immense desk was littered with papers and queer packages. Quinney noticed at once a faint odour like that of sandal wood. The atmosphere was warm and slightly stuffy. Having opened the casement, Lord D'Avenant carefully closed it, and indicated a chair.

"Sit you down, Mr. Quinney."

Quinney sat down, but his host, arrayed in a gorgeous dressing-gown, paced restlessly up and down, talking volubly:

"We have the place to ourselves. No flunkies as yet. My own servant, and a maid or two. Nice and quiet—hay?"

"Very quiet, my lord."

"One ought to be able to sleep here. Ever lie awake, tossin' about?"

"Not often."

"Beastly—perfectly beastly. But I was always a bit of an owl."

"You look owlish," thought Quinney. He had a vision of his host flitting here and there by night, ready to pounce upon anything and everything. As a purchaser he had, indeed, pounced upon everything at D'Avenant, taking over nearly all the furniture and pictures and some rare plate.

"You and I, Mr. Quinney, must make this place a museum."

Quinney rubbed his hands at the delightful prospect.

"There isn't much rubbish, my lord."

"I take your word for that. I have expert knowledge of oriental porcelain and Chinese lacquer. How long will you be over the oak?"

"That is quite impossible to say."

"I shall be here."

"You are retiring from business, my lord?"

"Retiring? I? Not much! But I can attend to my business from this room. It's a funny business, Mr. Quinney. I deal with funny people. I lived my life in China. I can pass for a Chink. Not much making up necessary."

"You'll never pass for a D'Avenant," thought Quinney.

"I shall give you a cup of tea presently. I dare say you'll want to look round by yourself. See you later."

Quinney got up, nodded, and went out.

Alone, he wandered through the house, and then into the park. The village lay half a mile away, and he remembered that he had forgotten to bring

tobacco. His mixture, however, could be bought at any inn. He decided to walk into the village.

Very soon he was passing through fine wrought-iron gates which, somewhat to his astonishment, had to be unlocked. A rosy-cheeked maiden informed him demurely that such were his lordship's peremptory orders. Quinney laughed.

"No admittance—except on business, my dear."

"Yes, sir. That's it. The villagers are rather miffed about it. There is talk of a right of way. But his lordship won't hear of that."

In the village more information was gleaned from the Boniface of the *D'Avenant Arms*. His lordship kept himself to himself, being rarely seen outside his own park. All the same he subscribed liberally to local charities and paid high wages. Everybody hoped and believed that he would turn out to be an up-to-date and enlightened landlord of a much impoverished estate.

Quinney strolled back to the house in time for tea, served in egg-shell china cups; the tea was infused for one minute and three-quarters only.

"You have never tasted such tea as that, Mr. Quinney."

Quinney admitted that he had not a palate for the rarest growths of tea, adding that it would be a pleasure to drink hot water out of such cups.

"Loot!" said his host in a high-pitched voice. "I annexed 'em from a Mandarin under sentence of death. I've picked up a lot of loot in my time."

He began to talk about porcelain of the earlier dynasties. Quinney was delighted. Then the old fellow showed him a couple of specimens, masterpieces

of handicraft, a five-clawed dragon of the Ming period that probably had belonged to an emperor, and a superlative kylin.

"My best things are in the bedroom. Like to see 'em?"

The old man jumped up with the agility of a monkey, waving prehensile fingers.

"I'm going to surprise you," he said.

Quinney followed him into the bedroom. Against the wall was a big steel cage. Lord D'Avenant touched a button, and immediately the cage was brilliantly illuminated.

Quinney gasped.

The cage was full of magnificent pieces of Chinese porcelain. The mere sight of them seemed to rejuvenate Lord D'Avenant. He gripped Quinney's arm.

"I have had two passions in my life. Collecting the best Chinese porcelain, and this place. Some fools think I'm not a true D'Avenant. But I am. I saw this house when I was a boy, and I said to myself, 'I'll have that one day.' Now—look at my stuff."

"There's nothing better in the world."

Lord D'Avenant snorted.

"There's nothing half so good."

At the end of twenty minutes, Quinney asked an interesting question:

"Are you insured against burglars, my lord?"

The old man cackled, rubbing together his thin brown fingers. Then he said impressively:

"I can charge that cage and those steel shutters," he pointed to the window, "with a high voltage that would electrocute any burglar who touched 'em.

I've had to protect myself, Mr. Quinney, against enemies." Again he cackled, adding slyly: "It isn't very healthy to be an enemy of mine."

When they returned to the library a Chinaman, in spotless white, was removing the tea-cups. He presented the usual impassive countenance to the "white devil" of a foreigner, but, when he left the room, his master spoke of him with something approximating to affection.

"My servant, Quong. The most faithful fellow in the world. He has been with me for years. I saved his life, saved him from a hideous death. He is devoted to me. He has stolen for me, Mr. Quinney. If I told him to kill you, he would nod his head, and your number would be up."

This was said with an air of such conviction that Quinney experienced a thrill—the first of many. Quong reappeared. He moved slowly and silently. D'Avenant spoke to him twice, not in pidgin-English, but in the Cantonese dialect. As he vanished again, the old man said with finality:

"He is the only man, Mr. Quinney, whom I trust unreservedly."

III

For several days, Quinney saw little of his new patron. Meals were served to the dealer in his own sitting-room. Twice he was invited to drink tea in the library. Upon the second occasion an incident took place that must be recorded. A telephone on the big desk began to buzz.

"London call," said Lord D'Avenant. "Please excuse me."

As he spoke he picked up the instrument. Quinney happened to be facing him. By this time the dealer was accustomed to his queer host's ugliness, and kindly disposed to an old man who had been consistently courteous to him. Suddenly, without warning, the evil that was in the yellow, lined countenance seemed to disfigure it. Quinney hardly recognized a harsh, querulous voice.

"Most certainly not. I refuse emphatically to see the man. He knows why. Tell him to go to the devil."

He replaced the instrument and turned to Quinney.

"If he goes to the devil, Mr. Quinney, he will find himself in congenial company. Let me give you another cup of tea."

Quinney, tingling with curiosity, remained silent. Before he returned to his labours, Quong came in. Immediately, Lord D'Avenant began to speak with marked agitation. And then, for the first time, the oriental mask fell from the face of the Chinaman. Evidently, he too was agitated. Quinney, of course, couldn't understand a word that was said. He guessed that orders, very peremptory orders, were being given. Quong inclined his head, like a mandarin, and withdrew. So did Quinney.

IV

A week later Lord D'Avenant was dead.

Quinney was half-dozing when a sharp knocking aroused him at half-past seven in the morning. The elderly housemaid came in, much flustered. Quong had found his master's door locked—as usual—and could not get in.

"He thinks, sir, that something awful has happened."

Afterwards, Quinney admitted to Susan that the same dismal apprehension laid a strangle hold on his vitals. Within a minute he had joined the frightened servants in the passage. He strode to the door of the bedroom and hammered upon it.

"Send for a gardener. We must break in."

A man appeared with a cold chisel and a hammer, but the stout oak door withstood for a time a severe assault. Quinney, ablaze with excitement, was the first to enter. Lord D'Avenant was not in bed, but the sheets and coverlets were disarranged. The steel cage was brilliantly illuminated. Quinney held up his hand.

"Don't go near the cage or the windows!"

He rushed into the library, where the lights were burning. The library, like the bedroom, had been locked and bolted upon the inside of the door leading to the passage. The door between library and bedroom was ajar.

Upon the Persian carpet, horribly contorted, clothed only in a dressing-gown and pyjamas, lay the old man.

Quinney touched his face, glancing at the fallen jaw and the glazed open eyes.

"He is dead," he said solemnly. "Fetch a doctor. Nothing must be disturbed till he comes."

The servants filed out. Quinney went back into the bedroom, and looked at the steel cage. With his amazing memory, he could almost swear that no precious object had been touched. He remarked, indeed, that one or two pieces had been added to the

collection. The steel shutters guarding the windows were closed; the room, save the bed, was in order. Then he went out, leaving the gardener in charge of the shattered door with instructions to allow nobody to pass through it. Quong, standing apart from the maids, was moaning. Quinney went up to him.

"Your master," he said, "must have felt ill in the night. He went into the library, and died."

Quong gesticulated violently.

"He velly strong man. He no die. I sabee. Man kill him. I tellee you, man kill him."

The doctor arrived. He was able to say positively that death had taken place some hours previously. He stated also that he had examined Lord D'Avenant very thoroughly about a month before, having been called in to prescribe for insomnia.

"A month ago, my patient was as sound a man physically as a man of his age can be. He lived very temperately. We must send for the police at once."

The local Inspector was summoned, a man of intelligence and capacity. The doctor and he knew what to do, and did it. Quinney tried to choke down some breakfast.

At about ten, the Inspector sent for him. Quinney found him and the doctor in the dining-room.

"Lord D'Avenant didn't die a natural death," said the Inspector. "You have seen much of him of late, Mr. Quinney. Has he given you any indication whatever that life had become tedious to him?"

"Very much the contrary. I have never met a man of his age with such astonishing vitality."

"Quite so. Doctor Merriman thinks that poison has been administered or self-administered."

"Not self-administered, Inspector," said Quinney, "I'd stake my life on that."

"We shall know more after the autopsy. The Chinese servant was the last to see his master alive. He left him at ten-thirty in his bedroom. It appears to have been a whim of the deceased to bolt himself in. The bedroom and library doors, communicating with the corridor, were locked and bolted on the inside. That is certain. The windows in each room were shuttered with steel shutters. Between the hours of eleven at night and seven in the morning a terrific voltage of electricity charges these shutters and the cage in the bedroom. It is humanly certain that no person could have entered either room through the window. The chimneys are very narrow. I have examined carefully the walls, the floors, and the ceilings. There is no evidence of any struggle. Snow fell during the night, but before ten. There are no footsteps in the snow below the windows. I am forced to believe that suicide is the only logical explanation.

"The Chinaman doesn't think so."

"I can get nothing out of him."

The doctor had to leave them. The Inspector turned to Quinney.

"I'm going back to the library. Will you come with me? You might notice something, anything, out of the ordinary."

Quinney, no fool in dealing with his fellows, decided that the local Inspector was free at any rate from what he termed "swank." He followed the official upstairs and into the library. The body had been laid, beneath a sheet, upon the bed in the next room.

Quinney stared about him, as the Inspector said quietly:

"It is possible, of course, that poison was administered before half-past ten, but by whom? There are poisons that act slowly. In that case, it is almost certain that Lord D'Avenant would have rung the bell and summoned assistance. The servants tell me that the Chinaman was devoted to his master."

"Who saved him from what Lord D'Avenant described to me as a hideous death. He trusted Quong—I quote his words—unreservedly."

"In a murder case, Mr. Quinney, we always look for motive. Such a man might have had enemies."

Quinney repeated what Lord D'Avenant had said about his enemies. The Inspector made a note.

"How does the doctor know that he was poisoned?"

"There were indications unmistakable to a medical man."

"Who switches on the electricity?"

"The electrician had his instructions. He switched on the current at ten-thirty, and turned it off, as usual, at a few minutes past seven. I know the man personally."

"It must be suicide," said Quinney, but, in his bones, he didn't believe it.

Together he and the Inspector re-examined the library. Upon the desk lay an unfinished letter to a London tradesman. A pen had been thrown down beside it. A catalogue of antique furniture was open, and certain items marked with pencil.

"We had looked at that," said Quinney. "He was immensely keen upon adding some rare bits to

this house. He wanted to make it a museum—his word."

"We are groping in a pea-soup fog," admitted the Inspector.

V

Home Office experts conducted the post-mortem, confirming the conjecture of Dr. Merriman. Undoubtedly the deceased had died from the effect of some violent vegetable alkaloid, such as strychnine. The body was arched, the pectoral and abdominal muscles were terribly contracted. Further analysis might find a trace of some poison in the organs removed to London, but the greatest toxicologist of his day remarked that there were alkaloids which left no trace whatever in the system. He and his colleague were agreed upon the essential fact. The alkaloid had caused strangulation. Death, probably, has been painful.

At the coroner's inquest a verdict of suicide whilst of unsound mind was mercifully recorded. No other verdict seemed possible. No phial was found near the body. The experts testified that death had taken place after midnight, and that so violent a poison must have acted swiftly. Nobody could have entered the room after half-past ten. Nevertheless the junior partners of Davenant & Co. testified against the hypothesis of suicide. But they had to admit that the late head of the firm was odd and eccentric, and that they knew him only slightly. Since his return from China business matters were left, for the most part, in the hands of the London representatives. Still, he had talked to them frequently of his plans

for the future. All his long life, they admitted reluctantly, he had been a man of mystery.

To the immense surprise of everybody, and most of all to the individual concerned, Lord D'Avenant left everything—apart from a few legacies and a substantial annuity to Quong—to the impoverished kinsman from whom he had bought Old Hall. That lucky youth immediately instructed Quinney to proceed with the restoration work.

This young man, Arthur D'Avenant, said to Quinney at their first meeting:

"There is a mystery here, Mr. Quinney."

Quinney agreed.

"I shan't rest till it is solved."

Meanwhile, inevitably, the suspicions of an egregious public fastened themselves upon the faithful Quong. But from the moment when the Chinaman learnt that his master's possessions had passed to a kinsman, he seemed to transfer his allegiance to that young man.

"I believe with you," said Arthur D'Avenant, "that Quong is absolutely innocent. At the same time I have a notion that we may find the murderer through him. How, I haven't the least idea."

Quong, unhappily, could only repeat, like a parrot, what he had said at first:

"Bad man killee boss. You see. Sometime we catch him."

He seemed to be quite unconscious that he was being watched.

The nine days' excitement over the mystery died out when the experts were unable to find any trace of poison in the organs examined. Dr. Merriman said to Quinney:

"This may be a case of oriental revenge. We know nothing of their methods."

At the inquest, Quinney repeated what he had overheard Lord D'Avenant saying over the telephone. But this slightest of clues ended in moonshine. One of the London partners had been at the London end. He, in his turn, testified that the senior member of the firm refused consistently to see importunate visitors. This particular visitor, whom he recalled perfectly, happened to be a sailor, once in Lord D'Avenant's service and discharged from it. He was now on the high seas again. Thereupon Quong was recalled to the witness box. Did he know this sailor, or anything about him? Quong, impassive as a graven image, shook his head, repeating, "I no sabee," till he was invited to stand down. Quinney thought to himself: "I wonder if the Chink is lying."

VI

The work of restoring the old oak went on slowly. Quinney returned to London and his Susan. The D'Avenant mystery was transmuted by the irony of things into an immense "ad" for the Soho Square establishment. The curious "popped in" to buy "bits" and ask for first-hand information. They got both. Susan became very unhappy.

"Joe," she said solemnly, "we're making money out of this horror; yes, we are."

"If you feel that way, old dear," replied her lord, "you needn't spend any of it."

"You ought to give all of it to my Waifs and Strays."

"What a Waif and Stray you'd be, Susie, if it wasn't for me!"

Amongst these visitors came Benyon, the explorer. He drifted into the shop when Quinney happened to be reasonably at leisure. Benyon beat no bushes. He said curtly:

"I am one of the few men, Mr. Quinney, who knew the late Lord D'Avenant."

Quinney pricked his ears, as Benyon continued placidly:

"I met him in China."

"You know China, sir?"

"I know parts of China as—as well, shall I say? as Lord D'Avenant did. He was an assiduous collector. Where are his collections?"

"At D'Avenant Old Hall."

"Could I see them? This is my card." As Quinney stared blankly at an unfamiliar name, the great man added quietly: "I think the Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society will vouch for me."

Quinney said briskly:

"That's quite all right, Mr. Benyon. I happen to be going down to D'Avenant the day after to-morrow. Will you come with me?"

"With great pleasure."

And so it came to pass that Benyon, by mere coincidence, so said Quinney, met Arthur D'Avenant. Benyon was taken to the drawing-room where two cabinets held all the finest bits.

"I knew that they were wonderful," he murmured.

Further talk soon convinced Quinney that an expert of the first rank was in his company, and he

hastened, as usual, to profit by such an opportunity.

"Some of these," said Benyon, "have a value quite apart from what they might fetch at Christie's as rare specimens of the earlier dynasties. I cannot imagine how D'Avenant got hold of them. Is there an illustrated catalogue of your treasures?" He turned to the young man.

"I am thinking of having one made—with Mr. Quinney's kind assistance. If—if you would help us, Mr. Benyon——"

Benyon said deliberately:

"If you wish to keep this collection intact, Mr. D'Avenant, *don't* have it catalogued!"

"Why ever not?"

"I can only say this out of knowledge which is, perhaps, my peculiar possession. No bribe, however great, would tempt me to carry *that* through Thibet."

He indicated a highly decorated Buddhist figure.

"It is sacrosanct," he added. "And so are these."

"But we are not in Thibet, Mr. Benyon."

"Happily, we are not in Thibet."

No more was said at the moment. After a time, Benyon observed abruptly: "It's an extraordinary thing to me that the late Lord D'Avenant committed suicide."

Arthur D'Avenant turned startled eyes to Quinney, who shrugged his sturdy shoulders. The three men were alone in the big room, the first to be finished by the restorers. About it hung a delightful atmosphere of warmth and light and restfulness. The old oak presented a soft greyish-brown tint against which the fine furniture was delicately outlined.

Arthur D'Avenant dropped his pleasant voice to a whisper.

"Mr. Quinney and I dispute the coroner's verdict. We—we believe that my predecessor was—murdered."

"Yes," said Quinney.

"Why have you come to that conclusion?"

"The facts were recited. Benyon made no comment, listening very attentively, till the Chinaman was mentioned.

"Is this man, Quong, here?"

"He is almost as devoted to me, Mr. Benyon, as he was to my master."

"I—I should like to see him."

Quong was summoned. Immediately, Benyon addressed him in the Cantonese dialect. Quinney listened, mildly amused, to the strangest concatenation of astounding and inarticulate noise. But he noticed that Quong seemed pleased and less of an image. Evidently he accepted Benyon as a superior being. At a sign from the distinguished traveller, he bowed and went out.

"Well?" murmured Arthur D'Avenant.

Benyon smiled, rather inscrutably.

"It *is* well," he said, with emphasis. "I was not quite easy when I heard there was a Cantonese here. This man was his master's slave. Probably, he is now yours. Might I see the library? It would be interesting—and possibly profitable—to attempt some reconstruction of this mysterious affair on the spot."

"The library," said D'Avenant, "has been shut up. Nothing has been touched since the tragedy."

They went upstairs. Later, Quinney told Susan

that he was tingling with suppressed excitement. He expected, somehow, that something would happen, that the keen eyes of Benyon would detect what had escaped other eyes. He was not disappointed.

The room was unlocked and unshuttered.

"He lay there," said Quinney, "with his knees arched. The pupils of his eyes were so turned up that only the whites were visible."

"Ah! And nothing was found near him, no phial, no object that might be even remotely considered—lethal?"

"Nothing."

Benyon sat down, thinking furiously, half closing his eyes. The others respected his silence. When at length he spoke his voice seemed to float from a distance, as if, in fancy, he were far away.

"I told you that I knew Lord D'Avenant," he began. "But I didn't know him well. Probably nobody knew him well, except, possibly, the faithful Quong."

"He was assuredly a very queer customer, Mr. Benyon."

"From what knowledge I had of him," continued Benyon, "it is grossly improbable that such a man, familiar as he must have been with rare and subtile drugs, should have taken a violent poison that contorted the body almost beyond recognition. Had he wished to kill himself, he would have selected some preparation of opium, and slid out of life easily and painlessly. There is a subtile poison known to me that produces the effects you have described, Mr. Quinney, and which leaves no trace in the human system."

"A poison known to you?"

"Did the doctors discover any puncture?"

"I don't think so."

"The poison to which I refer is administered hypodermically. A slight prick from a needle suffices. It doesn't act immediately. The prick may be so slight that the person pricked may be unconscious of it. The mark left would be hardly perceptible except to a very trained eye. The poison I mean has some of the characteristics of that extraordinary South American alkaloid, wourali. It paralyses action and heightens sensation. The sufferer undergoes tortures and is unable to move or cry out."

"Horrible!" ejaculated Quinney.

Benyon's eyes turned to the desk.

"What are those packages?"

"They were carefully examined," said Quinney. "They hold samples, odds and ends."

"You can examine them, Mr. Benyon," suggested D'Avenant.

Benyon did so, moving thin brown fingers delicately. He touched many commonplace objects with extreme care.

"You are on the track of something," exclaimed the young man.

Benyon paused.

"This is my opinion," he said slowly. "I agree with you that Lord D'Avenant was murdered. Probably the police thought as much, and discreetly kept their thoughts to themselves. Scotland Yard dislikes unsolved mysteries. I can imagine that the verdict of the coroner's jury was not displeasing. I take it that the cleverest wits were baffled. Nobody

entered this room or the bedroom. The late lord was alone when he died, alone when he was murdered. We fall back upon hypothesis. I submit that he was poisoned hypodermically. It is conceivable that an enemy, unable to get at him in any other way, sent him, by post, some tiny, insignificant article that a collector would be likely to handle. In handling it, he met his death. I am looking for that insignificant article."

He went on looking, but he didn't find it. The same disappointment awaited him in the bedroom. Finally, he stood in front of the steel cage, now empty.

"You say this was lit up when you broke into the bedroom, Mr. Quinney?"

"Yes."

"We may infer that the unhappy man, perhaps unable to sleep, got out of bed——"

"He had been in bed."

"We may imagine that he got out of bed and was gloating over his treasures!"

"I often do that," admitted Quinney.

"Then he passed into the library and began a letter. Whilst he was writing, he may have felt the first effect of the poison. In less than a minute he would be paralysed. In ten more minutes he would be dead."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Quinney.

Benyon continued imperturbably:

"I should like to call your attention to another hypothesis. You may take it from me that some of the porcelain in the drawing-room is of supreme historical and religious interest. I can't convey to

you the fanatic attachment that certain objects inspire in their possessors. The happiness and prosperity, perhaps, of a remote community may be actually centred in one ugly little figure. If such a figure were stolen from its guarded shrine, the devotees would stick at nothing, at *nothing*, to recover it. The quest might extend over years."

Arthur D'Avenant looked slightly uneasy.

"Let us suppose that an agent, the last man you might suspect, was instructed to recover such an object known to be in the possession of a man who guarded it like a Crown jewel: would he hesitate to kill that man, if he thought that his successor might guard it less carefully?"

"This," said Arthur D'Avenant, with a hard laugh, "is getting near the knuckle."

Benyon delivered the last thrust.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that the murderer of Lord D'Avenant will come here. You need not seek him. I should be sorely tempted, knowing what I do, to let him help himself and go his way."

"Never!" said D'Avenant.

Benyon smiled and spread out his hands.

"It has been a most interesting afternoon," he murmured.

VII

Arthur D'Avenant, being a young and healthy man, soon dismissed from an active mind the apprehensions excited by the explorer. He happened to be in love; approaching marriage with a charming girl engrossed his attention.

And nothing happened!

Quinney finished the oak, but, as generally happens in such cases, whenever real enthusiasm inspires the labourer, he pointed out other work that simply clamoured to be done. Some of the ceilings, for example, were in sad order; some had been almost covered with successive layers of bad plaster. And a fine "bit," absolutely "right," had to be placed reverentially in its one and only appointed place. Besides this, Quinney was now regarded affectionately by Arthur D'Avenant as a friend, and as such heartily welcome to come and go as he pleased.

He went down, one week-end, with a superb Cromwellian table, to find a bride at home after her honeymoon. Quinney had met the young lady before. He told Susan that she was real porcelain, and prettily decorated.

Arthur D'Avenant led him aside.

"I am worried about Quong, Mr. Quinney."

"Ho! What's up?"

"He is—at all hours of the night. I can get nothing out of him but this. He tells me that the 'bad man' is coming. It seems to be mere intuition, but these Chinks are uncanny. For instance, I wasn't expecting you, but before I got your wire yesterday Quong said to me, 'Quinnee—he come. You see.' And here you are, b' Jove!"

Quinney took this seriously.

"This beats me, Mr. D'Avenant. After our talk with Mr. Benyon I began to wonder whether Quong had stayed on with you because he hoped that the 'bad man' would come back."

"Quite likely," admitted D'Avenant.

"By the way," observed the bridegroom, "before

I brought Aline here, I went over every blighting object in those two rooms, a very tedious job. If Benyon's hypothesis holds any water, it would be too awful if my darling girl picked up the thing that did the mischief. However, the two rooms are still locked up."

"Quite sound," said Quinney.

"The damned thing couldn't be anywhere else, could it?"

"No," said Quinney. Then, not quite sincerely, but moved by the anxiety of the young man, he said lightly:

"I wouldn't worry, Mr. D'Avenant. Mr. Benyon was just guessing. A bitter enemy may have had his revenge. If so, he'll not bother you."

"I tell myself that, but I'm not quite sure about it."

"Does Mrs. D'Avenant know what we know?"

"No; she accepts the general verdict."

Presently Quinney got Quong alone, and took his arm.

"What's wrong with you, old chap?"

Quong said excitedly:

"Bad man come velly soon. I sabee. You bet!"

"But how do you know?"

Quong's pidgin-English became involved:

"He—sailor man. He come back. He wantee something. I no sabee what. Allee same, he come."

"And then?"

Quong burst out laughing, not a pleasant laugh.

"He catchee—me. You see."

"I hope I shall," said Quinney.

Over their wine, after Mrs. D'Avenant had left the dining-room, Arthur spoke again of Quong.

" He is scaring the maids with his nocturnal prowlings."

" Let him prowl ! "

" It's the deuce to keep maids in the country ; and this house is so remote."

" I have faith in Quong," said Quinney.

That very night, his faith was abundantly justified.

Quong tapped upon his bedroom door about an hour after midnight. Quinney let him in. He hardly recognized the man. He seemed to be vibrating with excitement, as he whispered :

" Bad man—he come. Now I catch him."

" With your naked hands ? " exclaimed Quinney.

Quong looked at his hands and smiled.

" You likee come, too ? "

For answer Quinney slipped a coat over his pyjamas. Then he picked up a serviceable poker. Quong smiled again.

" I catch him ! You see."

He seemed to float out of the room—a white wraith. Quinney followed. Moonlight illumined the long corridor, thickly carpeted. Quong sped down the stairs and into the great hall. He paused, finger upon lip, opposite the door of the drawing-room.

Noiselessly the Chinaman turned the handle of the door and vanished. Quinney hesitated for one brief instant. He could see that the drawing-room was not altogether in darkness. The swiftness of the Oriental's movements disconcerted him. He followed slowly on tip-toe. As he entered he heard a crash. Instantly, Quinney switched on the electrics at the door. In front of one of the cabinets, two

men lay upon the parquet. Silence succeeded the crash, and then a curious wheezing sound. Quinney realized that Quong was strangling the "bad man."

He flung himself upon Quong, trying to tear the steel fingers from a thick throat. Quinney had strong muscles, but he had to strain them to the uttermost.

Suddenly the hold relaxed.

"God! You've killed him."

Quong laughed and stood up. Then, bending swiftly, he ran his fingers over the man's body. He held up a pistol.

"I tellee you; he velly bad man. I sabee."

Very slowly, the prostrate man recovered consciousness. Quinney left him alone.

"Give me the pistol," he said to Quong, "and go you and fetch your boss."

Quong nodded gleefully and slipped away.

Quinney saw that the glass door of the bigger cabinet had been broken open. Upon a table stood the small figure that Benyon was not anxious to carry through Thibet.

"You lie perfectly still," said Quinney.

The man was gasping convulsively, but he lay crumpled up just where he had fallen.

D'Avenant came in, followed by the still smiling Quong.

VIII

Quinney may be trusted to finish the story in his own fashion as he told it to the awe-stricken Susan some twenty-four hours later.

"He was a queer cove, my girl, a dark, sea-faring man with gold rings in his ears. He could speak

to Quong in his own lingo, and did so when he got back his powers of speech. They went at it hammer and tongs, jabbering like monkeys. We had his pistol, and we were three to one. Perhaps we ought to have tied him up till the police came. Anyway we didn't. I told you that the door of the cabinet was open. Upon the middle shelf stood a small Kang He god, villainously ugly, coloured in bright turquoise. The mouth of the little beast was wide open. I particularly noticed it when the pieces were removed from the steel cage, because it wasn't up to the mark of the other bits. But it was in the cage, and we supposed that it was intended to be put there. But, oddly enough, I didn't remember seeing it when his lordship first showed me his treasures. Quong says that it must have been acquired in England, because he knows all the bits that came from China. As I was saying, Susie, we were taking a bit of an easy, before sending for the police, and I suppose our man knew that the game was up. He jumped for the cabinet, and grabbed the bright blue god or devil. And I saw him jab his thumb hard into the little beast's mouth.

" Well, my dear, we had to send for a doctor before we sent for the police. When they came our man was dead, drawn up and contorted, too. He died game, I must say. And when we got the blue monster out of his hand, he owned up. He had worked for Lord D'Avenant in China. He had helped to steal the little figure from some Buddhist shrine. Afterwards, I dare say, he tried blackmail. Anyway, he got the sack. He boasted to us that he had sworn to kill his former master, and he had the devilish art

of knowing how to do it. Collectors always stick their fingers into holes, just to see if the inside is polished properly. Bad bits are left in the rough. Inside the mouth of the blue beast he fixed a needle coated with that devilish poison. Mr. Benyon was right from first to last. Having killed his enemy the man attempted to steal the figure. He knew what price he would get for it in China. That's about all."

"Mercy me!" exclaimed Susan. "This comes of worshipping sticks and stones. What a lesson for you, Joe!"

"I don't steal 'em," said Quinney.

"I wouldn't trust you," sighed Susan, "nor any other collector."

"Mr. D'Avenant," concluded Quinney, wiping a heated brow, "is going to send back the little mischief-maker to China. Mr. Benyon will attend to that. And now, Susie, if you've no objections, I shall take a glass of sherry."

"I do object," said Susan, "but you'll do it just the same."

And he did.

Castle Kilrain

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES SHELAGH

§ 1

JOE QUINNEY was in the sanctuary of his establishment in Soho Square when Alfred, his faithful Cerberus, brought him an unstamped letter. Quinney glanced at the handwriting before opening it, and a smile brightened his face. At the top of the envelope was a line:

"*Introducing Sir Dion Kilrain, Bart.*"

Quinney said sharply:

"Is Sir Dion downstairs? He is? Show him up."

"Yes, sir."

"Wait! Don't know the name. Sounds Irish. What's he like, Alf?"

Alfred, as a trusted servant, was allowed a certain licence of speech, and it was his not too easy duty to keep from a busy master unpromising-looking customers, what Quinney called "The Rather-nicers" and "The Call-againers."

"A seller, sir, not a buyer, if you ask me."

"Um! And I'm overloaded with stuff. Never mind. Up with him!"

As Alfred vanished, Quinney opened the envelope and read a curt letter from one of his best customers, Angus Urquhart. Some twenty years before Mr. Urquhart had begun to collect old glass, Irish and English. Under Quinney's enthusiastic advice and supervision Urquhart had invested some ten thousand pounds, which meant a cool thousand to the dealer. The unique collection slowly brought together had been valued lately at seven times the original cost.

"*I know, my dear old Joe, that you will do what you can to serve a particular friend of mine, Sir Dion Kilrain, who is a charming and unhappy young gentleman.*"

"Serving," thought Quinney, "means standing and waiting for me. Six to four on that. And no takers."

He was not in the happiest of humours. Business was slack. Customers were scarce in September, not a good month for the big dealers. And worst of all, an expert at his trade knew that his "stuff" was not of the highest quality. Superlative works of art are the easiest to sell.

Sir Dion came in. Quinney stood up.

"You are Sir Dion Kilrain?"

"I am—worse luck!"

Quinney guessed that here was an Irishman who lived in Ireland. He spoke with a slight brogue. He looked young; and he might be charming. He did not appear unhappy, as he smiled disarmingly at the dealer.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"Faith, I don't know. I've come here to find out."

They sat down.

Now Quinney's sanctuary, which (leaving out Susan) held the dealer's most precious possessions, none of them for sale (except at an almost prohibitive price), was regarded by him as a testing-room. If a customer stared at the Chippendale cabinet, the dealer knew that a stranger was likely to buy furniture. If attention was concentrated on Cupid and Psyche, holding aloft the torch of love, Chelsea figures modelled by the incomparable Roubiliac, it was safe to infer that a seeker after rare porcelain had come to Soho Square. Miniatures and pictures might well challenge attention from connoisseurs in painting.

Sir Dion, as he sat down, "pointed" like a setter at the Irish glass upon a table facing him. A large two-handed posset bowl, as early as 1760, appeared to interest him. Inasmuch as the young fellow had brought a letter from Angus Urquhart this concentration of gaze was not surprising.

"Good bit," said Quinney. "Museum piece, what?"

"I know a better," said Sir Dion.

"Where is it? Of course, I know. In Mr. Urquhart's collection."

"No. In my saloon at Castle Kilrain."

"I congratulate you," said Quinney drily.

"You needn't. It's no good to me, none at all."

Having excited the dealer's curiosity (and incredulity) Sir Dion attempted to satisfy it, after his own leisurely Hibernian fashion. Quinney, who had travelled over every inch of Munster in quest of glass,

listened patiently. Sir Dion, it transpired, was the owner of Castle Kilrain, overlooking the village of Ballybarahane, in County Donegal. The house, a big barrack of grey stone, held good pictures, rare plate, and old glass.

"Lashins of old glass," said Sir Dion lightly.

"You are not buying old glass, Sir Dion?"

"I'm not buying anything, Mr. Quinney. My neighbours and I are as stony as the hills of Donegal."

"Um!" muttered the dealer. "I know Munster and Leinster well. Begor! what lively times I had over there in the ould days."

To please Sir Dion, Joe spoke with a quite passable brogue. His visitor laughed.

"For an Englishman, ye've got it fairly well."

Quinney was flattered. In auction rooms, and elsewhere, his Irish and American yarns beguiled dull hours. If he could reproduce the "patine" of old mahogany, why not fake for fun the rich tones of Munster?

"Do you know Donegal?"

"No."

Sir Dion grinned.

"My turn to congratulate you."

"Why?"

"Ye see, Castle Kilrain and everything in it may be blown to blazes any old day."

"Dear, dear!"

"In the disaffected state of the country I can't move my valuable stuff and I can't insure it."

Quinney nodded. He was not interested in Irish politics, but he knew that so far as insurance is concerned Ireland at Peace (to quote some gentlemen

of the Press) ranks to-day with Russia, Turkey and the Balkans.

"Why have you come to me, Sir Dion?"

"Ah, now, our friend Urquhart says you are a sportsman. I thought, maybe, I could persuade a sportsman to come over to Castle Kilrain and stop with me."

"Lordy! I don't want to be blown to blazes."

"You'll be safer than houses. Will a good horse tempt you?"

Quinney shook his head.

"If it's fishing——?"

"It isn't."

For the first time, Sir Dion looked unhappy. Quinney said with slight irritability:

"I'm a tradesman, sir, not a sportsman. Are you pulling my leg?"

"God forbid! An Irishman rides straighter than he talks. I had in my mind—*camouflage*. You can't come to Castle Kilrain as Mr. Joseph Quinney, the famous dealer. Not on your life! If you think you're not known by name in Donegal, you're too modest."

"But there is no reason why I should go to Castle Kilrain at all."

"There is. Urquhart says you're the man to pull me out of a hole deep as the divil's pit and dug by him, too, not by me."

"You mean——?"

"I mean," replied the young fellow earnestly, "that I must raise some money—a thousand or two—and I'll tell you why." His voice sank to the most ingratiating whisper. "I love the prettiest girl in Ireland,

the prettiest and the best. Should I be telling you this, if I wasn't sure you could help me, and her—bless her!—if you would?"

Hibernian frankness of speech, with Hibernian artfulness latent beneath it, had ceased to surprise Joe Quinney some twenty years before. Sir Dion went on, dropping the persuasive brogue:

"I want you to buy dirt cheap my best things and get them out of Donegal. Urquhart swears you're the only man who can do it, and I've only to look at you to know that he's not lying. If you won't do it for me, you'll jump out of your skin to do it for her when you see her."

"But I haven't seen her."

"You will. And we'll have barrels of fun flim-flamming the Shinners, I'll promise you that."

Quinney's sporting instincts, not nourished in snipe bogs, began to tingle.

"Have a drop of sherry, Sir Dion. It's all right!"

They drank two glasses of old brown nectar.

"Wonder what Mrs. Quinney will have to say to this?"

Sir Dion, not having the privilege of knowing Susan, couldn't guess, but he perceived, alertly, that the dealer was nibbling at the bait. He decided, too—which is to his credit—that bargains alone would not tempt a cautious tradesman from the security of Soho Square into the wilds of Donegal.

Miss Shelagh Bourke was working the spell.

And then, *mirabile dictu!* Sir Dion made Joe Quinney see Shelagh with his eye. He conjured up a nymph of the mountains, a colleen of the hills, who

beckoned, beseeching help, because she had strayed out of high, safe places into the quagmires of adversity. Of course, Joe's vanity was tickled. He and he alone had been chosen by a canny Scot and a fond Irishman to save a very uninviting situation. Shall we call Miss Shelagh Bourke an elusive sprite, a will-o'-the-wisp flitting across bogs? And can any man of spirit, drifting past middle age, sensible that life is losing its sparkle, resist the Call of the Wild when it comes to him at the psychological moment? Quinney was "fed up" with post-war inactivities and despondencies.

In justice to a young, impulsive, reckless Irishman, it must be recorded here that Sir Dion was wholeheartedly thinking of his Shelagh, not of himself, nor of Joe Quinney. An older man might have deemed it his duty to reveal not only Shelagh but the country in which she had been born. It is possible that Sir Dion credited Quinney with an intimate knowledge of disaffected Erin which any shrewd reader of the newspapers ought to have. Quinney read catalogues—not newspapers.

Sir Dion went his way, not too unhappy. Quinney promised to deliver an ultimatum within twenty-four hours.

§ 2

After supper Joe talked to, with, and at Susan. She interposed tearfully all the obstacles pat to a faithful wife's tongue, knowing even less of Donegal than her masterful lord. Still Ireland, in her opinion, was at civil war. She believed, for the thousand and first time, that her Joe proposed to risk his

precious life in the idolatrous quest of "sticks and stones."

"Things you're after."

"Persons in this deal, old dear."

"If you put persons first, which you never do, you'd consider me."

"Got to consider two persons this time, Mrs. Pipe-your-eye."

"Two——?"

"Man and a maid. Handsome couple."

But Sir Dion's artful tale, as repeated by Quinney, only served to provoke Susan into asserting that Joe needed a keeper more than a wife.

Later that evening, when Susan was resigning herself to the conviction that Joe would have his way, as usual, Quinney looked at an atlas.

"Donegal," said Quinney, "is part of Ulster. See."

Susan saw and was comforted. Ulster was loyal. Ulster respected law and order.

"It makes a difference," she admitted.

"Posy will come and keep you company," said Quinney.

"You mean to go, then?"

"Must try to get hold of the right stuff, Susie. What is doing me in? Hay? Sticking here in the shop, instead of nosing about, as I used to."

Susan retorted sharply:

"The right stuff comes to you now. You don't have to rush madly to it."

Quinney was cornered.

"If I was you, Joe, I'd see Lord Mel about this. He knows more about Ireland than we do. And if

his lordship says it's safe, I shan't worry so much."

This was excellent advice, not taken by Quinney. Lord Mel was in Melshire. And Lord Mel had sent Quinney to Ireland thirty years ago. The dealer honestly believed that Lord Mel would encourage him to go again to happy hunting grounds. To write to his kind patron meant a delay of forty-eight hours.

§ 3

Sir Dion presented himself punctually at three. He was heard to whistle as he ascended the stairs to the sanctuary. Probably he had lunched well with some Englishman who had shot "cock at Castle Kilrain.

To his dismay he discovered Quinney perched upon the fence of indecision.

"Want to hear more," growled the dealer. "You mentioned the word 'camouflage.' Didn't quite get you."

"My fault, Mr. Quinney. If you could amuse yourself throwing a fly across beautiful water shamelessly poached, why, then, nobody would think you were after pictures and plate."

"Cut out fishing, Sir Dion."

"Together," continued an optimist, "we hope to sneak my things out of Donegal. I believe we can do it, but it will take a bit of doing. It means bamboozling the Shinners. Every landlord in the West has been, or is, up against this difficulty of shipping valuables. The clever ones did it before the trouble became so acute. Holyhead is piled high with furniture, pictures, and what not. But, to-day, the Shinners

have their eyes skinned. Am I giving you cold toes ? "

" No," replied Quinney emphatically. " You're making me mad. A nice state of affairs when a man can't sell, move, or insure his own stuff. Bolshevism ! "

" True for you ! "

" But how am I to camouflage myself ? "

" You gave me a notion yesterday. There's one stranger welcome wherever he goes in Free State Ireland—the Irish-American. If you can mix up the Yankee twang with a Munster brogue you'll be as safe in Donegal as here. Can ye do it now ? "

Quinney, the raconteur, rose to the occasion. He spoke solemnly. He spoke convincingly as a transpontine patriot.

" Say, young man, if ye think that Ould Oireland wasn't the land of me birth, ye don't know enough to go in whin it rains."

" Not bad," said Sir Dion, with equal gravity. " Can you keep it up ? "

" In me own blessed counthry, I can, your Honour."

" You *are* a sportsman," exclaimed Sir Dion.

There was a pregnant pause. The Irishman frowned ; the Englishman chuckled.

" Perhaps, Mr. Quinney, you can suggest an Irish-American name ? "

" Glory be, I can, sor-r—Michael Dolan, of N'York City."

" Fine ! "

" A dealer in illicit whisky, a boot-legger."

" Better still."

" I met the real Mick, with hair on his back teeth,

when I was over there a year ago. I've been imitating him ever since. He made his pile out of whisky, and I took some dollars from him."

"Misther Dolan," said Sir Dion, "will ye give me the pleasure of your company at Castle Kilrain?"

"May the Blessed Saints presarve your Honour! I will."

They shook hands.

Before they parted there was much talk over ways—mighty rough ways—and means of transportation. Quinney became uneasily aware that Donegal had ceased to belong to loyal Ulster. Ulster proper held the "black" Protestants. Donegal was mostly Roman Catholic. Sir Dion, leaving London that same evening, intended to travel home via Belfast, the quickest and safest route. He suggested that Quinney should follow in his tracks. Sir Dion's friends would protect a stranger up to the frontier, and after passing that Kilrain cheerfully declared that he could and would take care of his guest. Quinney, however, obstinate always, and in this case ignorant of the true conditions (not quite so bad then as later), wished to travel via Dublin, and then on to Tyrone. Sir Dion admitted the dealer's arguments to be valid. Quinney wanted to rub up his Irish-American patter in Dublin, a town he knew well. He might be able to do "business" in Dublin. He hoped to reach Enniskillen and "the winding banks of Erne," and thence to Strabane.

"Trains are running, so I'm told, Sir Dion."

"I don't say they run, my dear Mr. Dolan, they crawl; but I dare say you'll get there some way or somehow. I can meet you at Strabane."

"Generally get there," declared Quinney, thinking of former objectives attained with difficulty.

"Then we'll leave it at that. You can wire me from Dublin. Telegrams are delivered at Castle Kilrain a thought quicker, maybe, than letters. Will this day week suit you?"

Quinney nodded and grinned, savouring the spice of adventure. As an Irish-American, if he "got over" as such, he would challenge less attention in the Free State than in Ulster. Kilrain admitted this.

"Must rehearse my part," said Quinney. "Can't afford to 'fluff my lines,' can I?"

Kilrain winced slightly. Young and reckless as he was, Quinney's safety concerned him. Being incapable of computing carefully costs and consequences, robustly optimistic that Urquhart had found him the "right" man to pull him out of a deep hole, he accepted help in the genial spirit which proffered it.

They gripped each other's hand for the second time.

§ 4

Mr. Dolan reached Dublin without any misadventure beyond a passing bout of sea-sickness. On the boat, to be sure, he may have wished himself safe in New York, but snug in an old-fashioned hotel not far from the Kildare Street Club he rested and refreshed himself with memories of jolly days and big bargains. Outwardly, the Milesian capital had not changed much, although he did hear a shot in the middle of the night which made him start uneasily. It might mean anything or nothing. The Dubliners

appeared unreasonably cheerful. The head waiter told an Irish-American that street-fighting was "a grand injucement to mirriment."

"Whin ye find out ye're not dead, ye're mighty glad to be aloive."

From this garrulous source Mr. Dolan slaked a thirst for information. He learned that he could count upon reaching his penultimate destination sooner or later.

"But it's likely, sor, to be later."

Hibernian philosophy, Saint Patrick's gift of grinning under bludgeonings, percolated through Quinney's tissues. "A man may be half dead and not know it," he reflected, thinking of dull days in Soho Square. He had not been in Dublin for twenty years. Long ago, out of tall, old-fashioned houses still standing, he had bought doors, pediments and chimney-pieces. When he over-tipped a taxi-driver the man lifted his hat, exclaiming:

"God bless your honour!"

"Must be something in the air," thought Quinney. "Anyway, I'm glad I came."

Next day, rolling leisurely through the less disturbed parts, he tried his American-Corkian brogue on fellow-passengers, who accepted him as Mr. Michael Dolan, from New York City. He wore rough tweeds and shoes with "bull-dog" toes. Across a green waistcoat was festooned a heavy rolled-gold watch-chain. In a green scarf sparkled a gorgeous pin, bought in the Burlington Arcade, and the scarf was pulled down enough to display a diamond collar-stud. In the rack lay a suit-case covered with transpontine labels.

He left Dublin early in the morning, and presently,

much to his satisfaction, saw hounds and horsemen out cubbing.

"Not much wrong here."

Later on he had to amend a too hasty conclusion.

Railways in the Free State had not then been torn up because both Free Staters and the Irish Republican Army entertained the hope (since abandoned) of marching on Ulster. Quinney, an Englishman who had been protected by the law throughout his life, reached a place some miles beyond the town of Cavan without misadventure. Here the train stopped and a mob of I.R.A. hooligans, camouflaged as Free State troops (more than half the Free State Army is Republican), mostly boys into whose ignorant minds and souls hatred of England has been inspired by lying propagandists, Hun and Bolshevik, took possession of passengers and luggage.

It was an eye-opener for Quinney.

A dirty, hulking lout approached the dealer, failed to recognize him as an Irish-American, and addressed him insolently:

"Come out o' that, damn yer sowl, an' be quick about it!"

He was fingering a trigger as he spoke.

The suit-case—despite the labels—was not spared. When this unpleasant ordeal was over and Quinney, much upset, had collected his wits and his belongings, he discovered that a razor and some warm underclothing were missing. On reaching Fermanagh, after passing the border, he and the other passengers underwent a less drastic experience at the hands of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

"Never bargained for all this," reflected Joe.

Eventually, he reached Strabane, and found Sir Dion on the platform smiling genially, although the train was three hours late. Possibly Quinney's "make-up" as an Irish-American provoked the smiles.

Kilrain greeted him in a loud voice:

"And how is Misther Dolan?"

Mr. Dolan answered through his nose. His accent might have aroused suspicion in New York.

"Wal, sir, I reckon I've changed more than Tyrone."

A gossoon carried the suit-case.

Outside stood an ancient mail phaeton drawn by a pair of ill-matched horses whose heads were held by an out-at-elbows groom, not in livery. The off mare stood up on her hind legs, presumably to take a better look at Mr. Dolan. Sir Dion murmured reassuringly:

"There's no better mare under a saddle, but she's new to this work. Steady now, Cruiskeen! Ye wouldn't be after giving Mr. Dolan a bad first impression of us, would ye?"

Mr. Dolan, dissembling his fears, seated himself beside Kilrain. The groom let go tossing heads, jumped nimbly to one side, and clambered up behind as the horses jumped into their collars. A wild "Hooroosh" from the gossoon speeded them, quite unnecessarily, on their way. Sir Dion said:

"A road like a corkscrew, Mr. Dolan, and as many holes as you'll find in a Gruyère cheese. Sit tight!"

"Is it far to the Castle?"

"Far enough. The ginger 'll be out of 'em before we've covered half the distance."

Mr. Dolan thought whimsically: "Gee! Why did I leave New York?"

Nevertheless, within a minute or two faith in Sir Dion as a Jehu sustained a dealer in antiques. Presently he glanced at a landscape not exactly pastoral in character. Forbidding walls met his wandering gaze. Tumbledown cabins, ramshackle gates flashed by.

"Give me a gate," said Sir Dion, "that I can put a young horse at with no risk of breaking my neck."

"Say, are they your gates?" asked Mr. Dolan, not unmindful of the groom.

"We strike the Kilrain property ten miles on."

They did strike it, within the hour, bumping over a bridge into a hole that would have held a hundred Gruyère cheeses.

"You can see the house, Mr. Dolan."

Sir Dion pointed with his whip at a grey, grim house beneath the crest of a bare hill. It looked reassuringly solid, not easy to blow up or set afire. A wild park encompassed it. In the far distance, beneath soft, grey skies, shimmered a silvery sea.

"Lough Swilly, the lake of the shadows, Mr. Dolan."

"The lake of the shadows?"

Shadows darkened Quinney's heart. Kilrain went on cheerfully:

"If you could ride, I'd show you the most lovely scenery, to my notions, in all the world. That is Slive Snacht, far away to your right."

Quinney stared in silence at the distant peak. Beauty, in any form, appealed to him tremendously, but the wild spaciousness of these bleak hills, the grandeur of mountain and gorge, were less beautiful

to him than mysterious. He heard Kilrain's genial voice with a ring in it.

"Shelagh Bourke will tell you all about Donegal. Her father claims that he has O'Neill blood in his veins. Here we are!"

The lodge gates stood open. The horses, smelling the stable, tackled a steep hill gallantly. And then, as Kilrain swept round a great circle of gravel nearly hidden by grass and weeds his passenger beheld a girl upon the wide stone steps of the house. She stood there, bare-headed, waving her hand. The declining sun kissed glorious auburn hair, and sparkled in dark-blue, velvety eyes.

Mr. Dolan was glad that he had left New York.

"Miss Shelagh Bourke," said Kilrain, as he pulled up his horses.

CHAPTER II

WE MEET MR. CASSIDY

§ 1

QUINNEY stared at Miss Bourke, as he stared at works of Art. But Nature, not Art, had embellished this young lady. She satisfied his first test.

"Porcelain, by gum!"

She was of medium height, a creature of curves. Quinney held no brief for the ultra-modern girl, tall, thin, flat-chested, and so often defiant of expression. Shelagh might have been moulded by Roubiliac. A grace, as of the general air, distinguished her. A beauty, according to accepted standards, she was not.

Quinney, an ardent connoisseur, denied her "prettiness." She carried a high head, not too small, upon fine shoulders. Her hair was parted in the middle, and caught up in a great knot that rested upon the nape of her white neck. Her mouth was generously proportioned, an Irish mouth widened by laughter. Her nose had the tiniest tilt to it. If she followed it, surely she would reach Heaven. Her cheeks had been encarmined by sun and wind. Her skin had been softened by Donegal rains. Her brow was broad and low like the adorable brow of Clytie.

"Bit of all right," reflected Quinney.

Nevertheless, a man born and brought up in the shadow of the highest spire in England felt quaintly shocked. What was Miss Shelagh doing, bareheaded and alone in a bachelor's establishment?

"Shelagh dear, this is our friend Mr. Dolan, from New York. Mr. Dolan, shake hands with Miss Bourke."

With the least taste of a brogue that would have made the fortune of an American actress, Shelagh said softly:

"It's glad I am to meet Mr. Dolan."

Her little hand rested for a moment confidingly in his. Quinney thought to himself:

"Bit o' soft paste."

Kilrain glanced round. The groom was driving the horses to their stables; no servant was in sight. He said in a whisper:

"He's come to Castle Kilrain to serve you, not me. Let him deny it if he can."

Quinney didn't deny it. Soho Square seemed incredibly remote. Ozone from Lough Swilly filled

his lungs ; Shelagh filled his eyes. Mr. Michael Dolan found his Hibernian tongue.

" It's pleased I am to meet Miss Shelagh Bourke."

Kilrain laughed and took Mr. Dolan's arm, pressing it affectionately.

" Good for you. Before we go in, take a look at our view."

It was panoramic.

The house faced west and north-west. Behind it rose the hill.

" The Bloody Foreland is over there."

" Um ! " muttered an Anglo-Saxon. Donegal names were not reassuring.

" If it wasn't for the Derryveagh and Glendowan Mountains I could show it to you."

" Can't show it to *me*," said Quinney, feeling that he was quite west enough.

" Beyond is nothing but blue water between us and your adopted country, Mr. Dolan. Rathmullen and Rathmelton you can't see, because, like the Spanish fleet, they're not in sight."

Practically nothing was in sight suggesting the works of Man. The setting sun shone amber and gold upon wild hills covered with stones and heather and green grass. Quinney failed to observe cattle or sheep. The bare nakedness of the land oppressed his soul.

" Ye should see the bluebells in May," said Shelagh.

" Not my strong suit," Quinney replied.

" Ye don't suffer from rheumatism, Mr. Dolan ? "

Quinney was gracefully reminded that he had dropped his brogue.

" I do not, Miss Shelagh. Why ? "

"Well now, we'd be afther takin' ye to the Holy Well o' Doon, where ye'd see the crutches all of a row left behind by cripples healed of their infirmities. Beyond the lough, over there, lies the Peninsula, where all the big fighting took place."

"When we weren't fighting the English we were fighting each other," said Kilrain.

Quinney betrayed slight, very slight, apprehension. Immediately, with a laugh in her voice, Miss Bourke murmured slily:

"Are ye thinking long, Misther Dolan?"

"Thinking *long?*"

"We mean by that homesickness. When the Donegal men leave our hills, they lie upon the Ethne stone, and the Princess Ethne, Saint Columba's mother, sees to it that they forget their own country."

Quinney had never heard of Saint Columba, and said so. Still smiling at him, Shelagh went on:

"Ye've heard, may be, that Ireland was known once as the Isle of the Saints?"

"Shinners about now, hay?"

She nodded.

"Where's the cultivated land?" asked Quinney.

"Reverting to bog and rushes," answered Kilrain testily. He led his visitor into the house. As they crossed a big hall, an old servant shuffled forward to take Mr. Dolan's overcoat and hat. He looked comically Irish, and wore prehistoric clothes, not livery.

"Where is Mr. Bourke, Terence?"

"His Honour went west the hill, Sir Dion."

"Decant a bottle of port for dinner."

Shelagh, with a wave of her hand to Mr. Dolan, flitted up the stone stairs bare of carpet. Kilrain

preceded an alert dealer into what was called the saloon, a finely proportioned room in the Early Georgian style. Good pictures hung upon the walls ; upon the mantelpiece scintillated two magnificent Waterford table-lights with a tall Cork urn, flatly cut, between them. Sir Dion indicated a shabby armchair.

" Mr. Bourke is Shelagh's father. He is staying here, with his daughter, because Bourke Hall and everything in it was burnt to the ground not three months ago."

" Gosh ! "

" And he lived here amongst his own people, doing what he could for them. It—it broke his heart."

" Beastly," commented Quinney.

" The less said about it, the better. What do you think of old Terence ? "

" Your butler ? "

" Call him the odd man. He's odd enough. We have just three servants—Terence, his wife, not too bad a cook, and little Moyna, his daughter. Three faithful souls, but spies."

" *Spies ?* "

" Unwilling spies, I grant you. All my poor people are terrorized. You'll see no signs of it. Some of them would pay their rents, if they dared."

" Um ! No rents ? "

" None. My wretched farms are going to pot. In the old days the soil barely supported our people. But they were kindly generous folk then, too proud to accept money from a tourist if he asked for a glass of milk. It's the same everywhere in Donegal—no more hiring fairs, the flax crops gone, the weaving industry dying with it, no trippers to hire cars and

boats, no English market for the big flocks of geese, even the pig-jobber short of a job. The priests can do nothing. I doubt if Peter gets his pence from Ballybarahane. My income used to be five thousand a year, mostly from Cavan, mind you, and things are nearly as bad there. Bourke is in the same boat —a boat with a hole in its side and sinking."

Listening alertly, Quinney, not Dolan, tried to determine whether or not he was sorry he had embarked upon what seemed a perilous enterprise. At the same time, the sight of the pictures and glass sustained him. And his thoughts strayed from them to Shelagh. Was this young fellow her accepted lover? He jumped to the conviction that Shelagh had not accepted him yet.

Kilrain went on, speaking in the same low voice:

"I have told you this because one light word, one thoughtless action might defeat our plans. You'll take a quiet look at what I have. You'll see in the dining-room some old Irish silver, Queen Anne and earlier, that'll make your mouth water. But Mr. Michael Dolan doesn't know anything about pictures, plate, or glass."

"Not a thing," declared Mr. Dolan.

"He's just a gentleman from America sorely distressed over all our troubles."

The door at the farther end of the saloon opened, and Terence appeared with whisky, plain water, and glasses.

"I thought your Honours might be missing the whisky."

He put down a fine George II salver and withdrew.

"His ear may have been at the key-hole," mur-

mured Kilrain, " but he couldn't have overheard us. Help yourself ! "

Quinney did so. The dust of Donegal lay thick in his throat.

" Do you forgive me," asked Sir Dion, " for bringing you to this God-forsaken place ? " Without waiting for an answer, he continued passionately : " I must get the Bourkes out of Donegal."

" Lord save us, Sir Dion, what keeps them here ? "

" Man alive ! what *keeps* them ? Poverty. And, may be, pride. Mr. Bourke is of kin to me and a dozen other men in these parts. We lived here amongst our own people. When Bourke's house was burnt down, the Shinners took his old mother and strapped her into a chair on the lawn. They let her think that they were going to shoot her son."

" They didn't ? "

" They didn't. But Lady Kathleen Bourke died in that chair. And Shelagh hasn't money to buy mourning for her grandmother. Take everything I have—at your own price. Urquhart says you're an honest man ; and I'll swear you are. But help me to get that dear girl out of—Hell."

" By gum ! I will."

" The money's here, if our wits don't fail us."

The door opened again. Shelagh and her father came in. At a glance Quinney saw that the father was a broken man. He greeted Quinney with courtesy, sat down, fiddled with his thumbs, and closed his tired eyes.

" He knows who you are," whispered Sir Dion.

§ 2

Dinner was served at seven. Kilrain brought up from an almost depleted cellar a magnum of claret not enough, as he mournfully observed, for four persons. Upon the mahogany table and sideboards shimmered the great tankards and salvers. The rest of the silver was scratched and dull. Terence polished the finer pieces as a labour of love. At the close of dinner there was great excitement. A pig had vanished, a precious pig, representing many future breakfasts. A hue and cry after the lost pig, in which everybody joined, took place.

"Stholen," sobbed Moyna.

"Pork by this toime," affirmed Tim.

"A very heavy loss," said Sir Dion to Mr. Dolan, who, in his zeal, had climbed into the hay loft.

Likely covers had been drawn blank, when Mr. Bourke appeared, perfectly calm.

"The pig," he said gravely, "is in the saloon."

Everybody, convulsed with laughter, went to the saloon to see an immense pig, who grunted amicably. Moyna and Tim laughed till they cried. Quinney alone was surprised at this extravagant manifestation of Hibernian mirth. Shelagh clutched Sir Dion.

"The pig! Oh, my dear!"

"In the saloon——! The cool cheek of him!"

"And so aisy, the dear baste!" observed Terence, with tears running down his cheeks.

"The pig! Holy Mother!"

"Did ye ever know the likes o' that?'

Mr. Bourke—thin, austere, bowed by his burdens—said derisively:

" Coming events cast their shadows before. Shinners, at their ease in saloons ! " Witty but hardly wise, in the presence of servants. Sir Dion's laughter stopped. He spoke sharply to Tim and Moyna, still giggling.

" Take the pig to the yard. Be lively now."

" Wirra ! We'll thry to coax him, your Honour."

The pig coursed three times round the saloon before he was evicted.

§ 3

Shelagh was up betimes the next morning and feeding Sir Dion's chickens. Pigeons, too, fluttered round her. Presently she talked to the pig who invaded saloons.

" Is it English ye are that ye wax fat whin yer betthers are stharving ? Unaisy ye should be thinkin' of empty stomachs. Thanks be to God I'm not a pig."

The pig grunted as Shelagh shoo'ed him away from the chicken food.

Tim was at work strapping the horses. Sir Dion, as Shelagh knew, was at work too. May be he was giving extra attention to the mare that Miss Bourke rode when she (the mare) was not fetching Irish-American gentlemen from distant railway stations, and then, thinking of Mr. Dolan, Shelagh's forehead began to pucker. She whistled softly, a sign of mental disturbance. Moyna, Terence's daughter, stopped for a pleasant word, as she carried a roll of butter from the dairy.

" Well, Moyna, ye took care, I hope, not to put Mr. Dolan between damp sheets."

"Miss Shelagh—— !"

"Don't spare the butter to the potato cakes. It's high-feeding he's accustomed to in New York."

"Your Honour's ladyship is Misther Dolan's frind."

"Never saw the dear man before, Moyna."

"Shure he's a thraveller. Tim showed me what he calls his shoot-case. An' ye couldn't see leather for libels. A nice man, so father says."

Shelagh nodded, as Sir Dion came out of a loose-box facing the yard. Moyna scurried away, blushing. She had a nose for romance.

"Morning, Shelagh."

"Morning, Dion. Ye'll smell less of the stable if ye take a turn with me before we go in to breakfast."

Together, they strolled across the yard, grass-grown like the carriage sweep, and wandered round to the front of the house. Far from prying eyes and ears, Shelagh stood still.

"Tell me now what you meant, yesterday, when you told Mr. Quinney——"

"For the love of God !"

"I'm no fool, Dion. You said that he came here to serve me."

"Did I now ?"

"You know you did. And, on my word, he looked at me as if 'twas true."

"Shelagh dear, it is true. Urquhart told me he was a 'card,' not the ordinary sort of man."

"What did you tell him ?"

She had dropped her beguiling brogue. Her eyes met his squarely.

"I told him what I've told you, that I loved you,

that I wanted to get you out of Hell. And, somehow, it did the trick. He has a soft spot : not in his head, but in his heart."

He was looking for a forgiving smile ; none came. Shelagh spoke slowly, weighing her words.

" This means, then, that I have to share with you a very serious responsibility. Are you mad, Dion Kilrain, to bring a man like that to such a place as this ? "

" Faith, if I'm mad, you know why."

A smile trembled upon her lips and vanished.

" If harm comes to him, and it may." Her lips quivered.

" Shelagh, you take it from me that Mr. Michael Dolan can play his part. He has played it, so he tells me, for fun. Won't he play it even better when so much is at stake ? "

The brogue came back.

" Ye've put the fear o' the Lord into me. Ah, now, am I worth it—am I worth it ? "

He held out his arms, entreatingly silent. She stepped back resolutely, shaking her head.

" Ye've always been too sure of me, Dion, and I'm not sure of myself. It's sure as death I'll be that ye're my own dear man, before your lips touch mine. But this I do know," she added intensely, " ye're risking more than ye think."

He looked unhappy and puzzled.

" I go out of your life, Dion, if harm comes to this Englishman."

An Irishman replied happily :

" And I'll go out of my own, Shelagh, before that happens."

His vehemence touched her. She smiled demurely.

"May be, now, I can eat breakfast."

They walked back to the house.

§ 4

After breakfast Quinney had occasion to go to his bedroom. It had not impressed him too favourably. The windows rattled at night; the door refused to shut unless it was bolted; black-beetles scurried in and out of cracks in the wainscot. The bed, however, was comfortable and the sheets of the finest linen. Upon the walls hung portraits of dead-and-gone Kilrains long banished from the reception rooms.

As he bustled down a side passage, Quinney heard somebody singing. He pushed open the door and beheld Shelagh.

Shelagh Bourke—making his bed!

Joe was no snob, but he loved quality wherever he found it. Before leaving Soho Square he had looked up the Kilrain and Bourke pedigrees. Shelagh, so he discovered, was of kin to the noblest families in the west of Ireland. Her grandmother had been the daughter of a famous peer.

He eyed the young lady mournfully. His brogue fled to New York.

"Miss Shelagh——!"

She laughed and punched a pillow.

"Well, now——?"

"I can make my own bed."

"And be sorry to lie in it. This is woman's work."

And then, smiling at him, displaying two faultless

rows of small teeth, she paid him what was, perhaps, the prettiest compliment of his life.

"I'm glad to make your bed easy for *you*."

"Gosh! I'd sooner sleep on the floor."

"Nonsense. Ye see, Moyna milks the cows, and washes and sweeps and scrubs. Would it be fair to overwork a decent girl who is underpaid?"

"This is awful," said Quinney.

"We're in Donegal."

Her laughter tinkled deliciously.

"Help me, like a kind man, to turn the mattress."

He did.

"You were singing?"

"Crooning! And why not, Mr. Dolan?"

"It fair beats me," gasped Joe Quinney.

"What beats you?"

"That any of you can laugh."

Thus challenged she became serious.

"I haven't time to explain that to an Englishman. If we laugh, the world laughs with us. The whiners whine alone. I read something like that long ago. And I put it into the pickle barrel. Tell me now, d'ye think ye can succeed where so many have failed?"

"Hate failing," growled Quinney.

"Ye're forninst the Government?"

"Not for the first or last time."

She smiled at him.

"I fear ye leaped before you looked."

Quinney soared to heights—for an Englishman. He met her laughing eyes squarely.

"I'm looking now, and I'm glad I leaped."

"Misther Dolan, yer mother must have kissed the

Blarney stone. Be off with ye, an' don't disthurb an honest girl at her work."

She was dismissing him with a royal gesture, but Quinney, under the spell of her soft voice, put a sharp question :

" Sir Dion wants to get you out of this, Miss Shelagh ? "

" And if I don't want to go——"

" *Don't* want to go——? " he repeated.

" Donegal is dear to me."

She quoted, in a moving monotone, some lines :

" Pearly are the skies in the country of my fathers,
Purple are thy mountains, home of my heart :
Mother of my yearning, love of all my longings,
Keep me in remembrance, long leagues apart."

A confounded man picked up what he was seeking and left the room.

§ 5

Within twenty-four hours, without exciting suspicion, he carefully appraised every object of value in Castle Kilrain. The furniture was negligible, a good piece here and there, nothing notable. He had hoped to find *one* superlative picture. To his disappointment all the best pictures were of average merit. Miniatures and jewels had been sold. The plate and the glass were superb.

Was the problem insoluble ?

Could pictures, plate and glass be transferred to Soho Square without raising a storm that might wipe out an ancient house and what was left in it ?

Shelagh, thinking no doubt of risks as yet unenvisaged by the dealer, dampened Quinney's ardour.

She told him that her father had been unable to remove his fine furniture. It was burnt with the house.

"Ye see, Mr. Dolan, the Shinners know our business better than they know their own."

Quinney nodded. He knew that when a landlord or any property owner in the west of Ireland spoke of "Shinners" he included Republicans and Free Staters alike. There was no line of demarcation between them.

"Ye've seen the country, Mr. Dolan. It's wild enough, but our people are wilder. And, sure, ye won't find that out by just talking to them."

Shelagh "vetted" Mr. Dolan's brogue, and passed it as sound enough for an Irish-American. She urged him to inspect the village Ballybarahane. Every man, woman and child in it knew that Mr. Michael Dolan, of New York, was Sir Dion's guest.

"Thanks to Moyna and Terence ye're the big noise; and they'll make ye welcome, not for our sakes but for their own. They'll be thinking that some of your dollars may slip into their pockets."

"Isn't there anybody you can trust?"

Shelagh laughed.

"Trust is it? Not a living man of 'em would I trust till he was dead and six feet under the sod."

"Um!" growled Quinney.

He sauntered through the village that afternoon. Shock-headed children bolted like frightened rabbits into stone cabins, peering curiously at a stranger. The men and women grinned at him, and soon were cracking jokes with him. Their gaiety astounded him; their ignorance passed human understanding.

And the great bare hills that encompassed Ballybarahane, the rough twisting roads, the broken bridges, the walls so convenient for ambuscades, were disheartening to any man, however resourceful, who was contemplating the safe transportation of works of art.

Nevertheless, he did not quite despair. Had he ever heard of Andromeda he might have compared himself to Perseus. Shelagh had captivated him. Apart from her beauty, he recognized in her an intelligence as acute as his own and a pride that he respected. Little did he guess that this girl's future happiness depended upon him and his security amongst a fierce peasantry.

Obviously Ballybarahane had once been fairly prosperous; it still remained picturesque. Quinney dropped into it unexpectedly, dipping from hill and heather into a glen with a few trees here and there, and a peaty stream running through high banks just "polluted," so Moyna told Mr. Dolan, with trout. But although built to endure, it exhibited pitiful signs of poverty. Many windows were paneless; doors hung upon broken hinges; most of the roofs let in wind and water; pigs and cows strayed where they pleased.

The Catholic Church was the only building of any importance, and beside it, a tiny oasis in the desert, was Father O'Flynn's neat presbytery, set in a tiny garden full of autumnal flowers. There were no other flowers in Ballybarahane—save flowers of speech.

The villagers, sharp enough where their own interests were concerned, chatted softly and sweetly with

Mr. Michael Dolan. Had they realized that he was amongst them for no other purpose than to help a landlord, they would have shot him as if he were a tax-collector, but Quinney didn't know that—yet. America still sent good dollars to the Shinners. Police had vanished from Donegal; magistrates had abandoned their benches. Sir Dion lived, as best he could, simply because everybody had known him from a child. In a queer fashion Ballybarahane was sorry for him. The statement by Sir Dion that some of them would pay their rents, if they dared, was dismissed by a shrewd man of business as *ex parte*.

"Would I pay my rent if I needn't?" thought Quinney.

He found out that his presence as a guest at Castle Kilrain excited wonder. Mrs. Sweeny, who kept the post office (and had time on her hands), voiced that wonder in no uncertain tones:

"Your Honour is at home wid the quality. May be ye're of kin to Sir Dion now? I've dandled him on me knee many a time. 'Tis his old frind I am, an' he knows that same. Shure, it's proud ye must be stayin' in a grand histerical castle."

Metaphorically, an Irish-American "pulled up his socks." They were fancy socks.

"Madam," said Mr. Dolan, attempting to establish himself as an American citizen, "I am more at home in me own snug parlour in N'York. From me windows I can see the statue of Liberty Enlightening the Wor-rld."

Mrs. Sweeny grinned encouragingly.

"The Land o' the Free, madam. If I towld ye that

me poor father an' mother were hounded out o' Dublin, an' me a babe at the brist, would ye belave me ? "

" I would, sor-r-r."

" And if I towld ye that the counthry of me adoption had made a ragged boy rich, what would ye say, Mrs. Sweeny ? "

" The Blessed Saints be praised ! "

" I have come back, madam, to form me own opinion of how things are over here. I brought with me—letthers. By the same token, is there a letther here for me this minute ? "

" Faith, there is not."

" I brought a letther from a big man in N'York to Sir Dion Kilrain, an' that's that, Mrs. Sweeny."

" It is indade."

" Will ye do me a favour, Mrs. Sweeny ? "

" I will, your Honour."

Mr. Dolan lowered his voice. Mrs. Sweeny lowered her head.

" If—if, madam, a letther should come for Michael Dolan, without Castle Kilrain on the envelope, ye'll kape it for me. Don't send it up yonder."

Mrs. Sweeny nodded. Her nose twitched, scenting mystery. Mr. Dolan bought " sweeties " for the children of Ballybarahane, and he gave the change to the village " softy " who was hovering expectantly about the door in thin rags. Mrs. Sweeny was delighted with Mr. Dolan, as she whispered :

" Quare he is, your Honour, and little he gets in these times for back or belly. There's not much on wan and nothing in t'ither."

§ 6

Mr. Michael Dolan went his way, carrying a bag of very uninviting sweeties. Before he was half-way through the village a dozen children were following him chattering like starlings. The bag of bird-seed was soon empty. Mothers, standing at cabin doors, grinned as a nice man strolled by.

Suddenly, much to his surprise, out of a tumble-down cabin, holding a kerchief either to her nose or her eyes, hurried Shelagh Bourke. Mr. Dolan lifted his hat with a Fifth Avenue flourish. Shelagh hesitated, put away her handkerchief, and joined him. Mr. Dolan looked at her and away from her. She had been crying.

After a minute or two, with a grateful appreciation of her companion's interest in the scenery, she said with a gulp :

" I have been to see one of my own people, an old servant who married a Ballybarahane man. She is in great trouble."

Mr. Dolan would have asked questions ; Joe Quinney held his tongue. Doubtless, Miss Bourke would say more.

" Her only son has been killed," she whispered.

They were barely clear of the village. Shelagh glanced about her.

" They have ears that hear the grass growing."

Quinney nodded. He wondered whether the cows and pigs in the village street could be trusted, and said so. To his amazement, Shelagh, smiling at him through her tears, perpetrated a pun !

" Ye can see for yourself, Mr. Dolan, don't the pigs carry tails ? "

"You *are* the goods," affirmed a dealer in antiques, admiringly. The pigs, however, carried limp tails. Not one of them was curled into a nice tight optimistic knot.

They began to ascend the steep hill which led to the big house. In a less restrained voice Shelagh recited some ugly facts to a wondering Anglo-Saxon.

"He was murdered, shot dead in his own potato patch at short range by somebody skulking behind a wall."

"Why?"

"Ask the Blessed Saints, not me. Maybe he was a Free Stater, one with sense enough to know that, even if England allowed it, Ireland can't rule herself as a Republic. May be he was a Rebel. Nobody knows. Nobody can ever know."

"But something will be done, hay?"

"Not a thing. That poor soul, back there, is consoling herself with the thought that her boy is missing purgatory, having had more than his share of it in Donegal. Likely enough it wasn't politics."

Quinney, worse confounded, muttered:

"Not politics?"

"Maybe he had a bit of money on him. It's not safe, indeed it isn't, for you to be flaunting that pin."

Quinney saw humour in this admonition. He touched his scarf-pin and grinned.

"Seven-and-six, Miss Shelagh."

"Mr. Dolan, dear man, ye paid too much for it. But leave it at home when ye have a mind to walk through Ballybarahane."

"Holy Gee!" exclaimed Mr. Dolan.

Nevertheless, it pleased him mightily that she was

concerned for his safety. Possessing a singularly robust and sanguine temperament such risks as he was running were exhilarating. He said reassuringly :

" You mustn't worry about me."

" But I do. And I'm vexed with Sir Dion for tempting you here. I shan't be easy again till ye're back in—New York."

" Um ! Not going back empty-handed. Hate wasting my time—always did."

She glanced at him critically with trouble in her eyes. As they approached the house, she added another word of caution :

" Not a thing to father about what I have just told you. He's unhappy enough. We must try to make him laugh at tea."

And they did.

§ 7

But, after tea, Quinney happened to find himself alone with Mr. Bourke. Kilrain and Shelagh had work to do. Bearing in mind the young lady's injunction, Joe picked up a book and began to read. Mr. Bourke was smoking his pipe by the peat fire. Suddenly he got up, approached the dealer, and sat down beside him.

" I know why you are here," he said.

Quinney nodded. He noticed, for the first time, that this man whom he had reckoned broken by his misfortunes possessed a singularly clear and musical voice. Kilrain had told him that before and during the war Shelagh's father had been a personality in Ireland, intimately in touch with Authority. He knew further that as a loyalist and large landowner

Mr. Bourke had been advised to leave Donegal long before the fateful Treaty was signed. His great house, full of Chippendale and Sheraton furniture, had been destroyed in June, 1922.

"Go back to civilization, my dear sir."

"Not yet," replied Quinney doggedly.

Mr. Bourke remained silent. His eyelids flickered and dropped. But he continued slowly:

"The situation is beyond you. To the last, up to the moment when they drove me from my home, I—I hoped that I should be protected, because we were sacrificed to save England. England, I maintained, would stand by us. She didn't."

Quinney looked puzzled, as well he might. Indeed he thought that an unfortunate gentleman's wits were wandering. In a sense, perhaps, they were, and down what roads! Each ending in quagmires of disappointment. Mr. Bourke, apparently paying no attention to Quinney but speaking as if to himself with increasing lucidity and intensity, went on:

"We were left at the mercy of primitive men who are too ignorant to govern themselves. Never, in the sad history of Ireland, have we been able to govern ourselves! Prosperity has been forced upon us again and again to no purpose. Long before the English came here, we fought and—and starved. We shall starve again. That alone is certain. What was I saying? Yes; we were left defenceless. The British Government took from me my shot guns; they took all weapons from all loyalists, and they left the Shinners fully armed with service rifles and automatics."

His voice died away. Quinney, in absolute ignor-

ance of these disconcerting facts, accepted them as true. Mr. Bourke's diction reminded him of his kind patron, Lord Mel. In the same absent-minded fashion, Mr. Bourke began again :

" You know, perhaps, under what extreme pressure the Treaty was signed which has turned this unhappy country into a cockpit ? "

" I don't, sir."

" Ah ! But I do. You remember when the Germans broke through Gough's 5th Army in March, 1918 ? "

" Yes."

" After smashing the Russians, the Boche was able to mass two hundred divisions on the Franco-British front."

Quinney nodded grimly. Mr. Bourke went on speaking incisively.

" The Huns fell on our weakest point where Haig joined Pétain. Ludendorf intended to break our line and hurl us back on the Channel ports ; then he would have annihilated the French. On the 21st of March he struck with sixty divisions, and he pushed back the Allied line thirty miles. Our casualties were a quarter of a million men ; we lost seven hundred guns ! "

" Oh, Lord ! " groaned Quinney. He had not carried these appalling figures in his mind.

" Lloyd George was summoned to Paris. It was decided that only one thing would bring ultimate victory to the Allied arms, a quickening-up of the American reinforcements. Wilson, on being pressed, admitted that the traditional Yankee hustle could only be achieved by some immense concession. The

Allies were desperate. Help had to be forthcoming. Wilson made his bargain with Lloyd George. Wilson promised large reinforcements if we would transport them, provided Home Rule was given to Ireland as soon as the war was over. England accepted his terms; and we Loyalists were sacrificed to save civilization, and that, Mr. Quinney, is why we have borne our sufferings and miseries in silence."

"But," gasped the astounded Quinney, "this help bought at such a price could hardly have come in time."

"True enough," said Mr. Bourke. "The big Hun thrust petered out during early April in the awful shell-holes and old battlefields of the Somme, and the Hun morale began to crumble. Foch and Haig made a terrific effort, but behind this, the key of the situation, lay the untouched American man-power. Wilson made good. By June he had sent us six hundred thousand men, mostly in our ships; by September a million. The British Government had to keep its pact."

Mr. Bourke walked back to his arm-chair, sat down and closed his eyes. Quinney did not know at the time, and he never will know, whether or not this bit of secret history was revealed consciously or subconsciously.

Two more days flitted by.

The weather in September was perfect. The sun rose and set in stainless skies. The mountains of Donegal were softly blue. Quinney missed the woods of England.

"More stones than sticks," he muttered, thinking of Susan.

Kilrain caught fish for the pot. He spoke proudly of the woodcock shooting.

" Used to be the best in the world."

He was hopeful that agricultural matters might mend in Cavan, and alone with his guest laid bare an ingenuous heart. He had loved Shelagh before her hair went up. He said with conviction :

" You'd love her yourself if you saw it down."

He spoke of his plans, if—if precious goods were safely delivered in Soho.

" I could marry the darling. There's a house in Cavan. Room in it for the old gentleman, too. Could I ask her to live here within a few miles of the beasts that burnt her own home ? A true Donegal girl ! And her ways ! Have ye seen her with my pigeons cooing about her ? No. Ye must. And—outside a horse ! To watch her taking a big lep would warm your soul. Times, now, I think she'll never have me. I'm not good enough for her. But who is, tell me that ? "

" Search me," replied Mr. Dolan.

" Ye'd have to search Ireland and England too with a small-tooth comb to find her like."

Quinney was touched ; and his impotence to help this youthful couple made him grind his teeth. When Sir Dion took his rod to the river, an unhappy dealer in antiques wandered up and down blind alleys with Shelagh.

" Must be a way out somewhere," he growled.

" If there is, ye're the man to find it," declared Miss Bourke.

Quinney smiled paternally at her, and—was it the air of Donegal ?—he smiled inwardly at himself. He said, jerkily :

"Got a lot to learn. It may astonish you, Miss Shelagh, but less than a week ago, I thought Donegal belonged to Ulster."

"Did ye now? And would I blame ye for thinking that? Sure we did belong to Ulster till Lloyd George tore a beautiful daughter from a mother able and willing to make a naughty girl behave herself. There's not a landlord in Donegal who'd fail to tell ye that. Amputation it was, neither more nor less."

Her eyes flashed angrily. And then, out of the fulness of personal knowledge, she stated the case of the property-owner as against that of the "Shinner." She soared far above the head of a dealer in antiques, ending with a sob in her throat.

"Maybe we'll starve together, gentle and simple, for it's blue ruin that thrives to-day in Donegal."

"Must get her out of this," thought Quinney. As a young man he had boasted that obstacles merely whetted his determination to surmount them. Shelagh's melting orbs, encircled by long dark lashes, were certainly rejuvenating.

Shelagh went on, confidentially:

"Ye see, no man here knows which way the wind is blowing."

"I'd like to think it was only wind," said Quinney. "Why don't the Free Staters send an army into Donegal?"

"You dear, innocent man!"

"Never was called that before, never!"

"This is the way of it," cooed a soft voice. "When a Republican smells trouble he just joins the Free State army, and gets a bit of military training and a bite of better food."

"Lord save you, Miss Shelagh."

"Maybe He will in His own good time."

"But I can do nothing—nothing. If your servants are spies——"

"Ye can take it from me that poor old Terence belongs to the Ballybarahane Circle."

"Circle?"

Shelagh explained. Every village in the West had its Republican Circle. And each Circle had its Centre. Centres met Centres. But Circles did not meet Circles. In this respect they resembled Euclid's straight lines.

"If I collared a tankard——"

"Terence would know it. Anything he knows must be told to his Centre. D'ye see now?"

"London fog," growled Quinney. "It comes to this, neither Sir Dion nor I can take out of Castle Kilrain one article of value. And we must have half a dozen."

Shelagh said jestingly:

"You'll have to play burglar."

"By gum!" exclaimed Quinney.

"It beats me," continued Shelagh, less lightly, "why his people haven't burgled him. They are starving for want of money."

"Couldn't sell the stuff. Soft job, if they knew enough. Tell me, Miss Shelagh, who is the biggest blackguard in Ballybarahane?"

"Pat Cassidy. Wasn't his father the biggest blackguard hereabouts before him?"

Pat, it appeared, was a horse-coping publican and sinner, a sometime Fenian and Moonshiner, and everything else he ought not to be, with one redeeming

virtue. He could ride or drive any beast with hair on it.

Mr. Dolan thought it might be helpful to make the acquaintance of Pat Cassidy, but he didn't say so to Shelagh. The possibility of harm coming to her through some blunder in tactics disturbed him. With this apprehension rankling in his mind, he asked a question:

"If a man snatched a watch out of another's hand in Ballybarahane, what would happen?"

"Ah, now, there'd be a beautiful scrap."

"The victory ain't always to the weak," observed Quinney. "If the stronger man got the watch——?"

"Faith! he'd be keeping it, but, ye see, there's no watch worth snatching in Ballybarahane, and the time o' day doesn't matter."

"Nothing matters, hay?"

"Not a thing," laughed Shelagh.

At the first opportunity Misther Mike Dolan sought out Pat Cassidy, whom he found in the village shebeen, euphemistically called "The Hotel." Pat was a man of sixty, thin, wiry, full of quips, apparently upon good terms with himself and everybody else. His shifty grey eyes lingered lovingly upon Mr. Dolan's gold chain. From Pat Cassidy, a dealer in antiques gleaned the Free Stater's point of view. Pat laid stress, when talking to an Irish-American gentleman, of the advantages secured to Donegal by severance from Ulster. Quinney, not Dolan, reflected that the wiping-out of laws and police gave wide scope to the activities of clever rascals. Blue ruin had not been Mr. Cassidy's portion. Warmed by whisky that had never paid duty, and encouraged by the sympathetic

Mr. Dolan, Pat indicted Ulster as the mother not of Donegal but of all evil. He hinted darkly, his red hair bristling upon his high, narrow pate, of what would happen to Ulster when the blessed saints took concerted action against her. According to Pat the Holy Mother Herself was about to descend on all Black Protestants.

"And thin, begor! look out!"

Mr. Dolan, envisaging a blood-drenched Ulster, expressed the considered opinion that America was a healthier place for a quick-witted Irishman than Ireland.

"Bone dhry! Me for Donegal!"

"*Me* for N'York," declared Mr. Dolan. "Mr. Cassidy, if I tould ye that I'd made big money in whisky this year, would ye belave it? Aisy money, too, when a man is in with the police."

"*In* wid the polis——? God's own counthry! 'Tis proud I am, yer Honour, to see ye in my hotel. Wan more, sor-r-r?"

Mr. Dolan rose with dignity.

"I was sent here, Mr. Cassidy, by—no names!—by *frinds* with money to burn——"

"Holy fly! Money to bur-rn!"

"To make inquiries, on the spot, to—to talk with all and sundry."

Mr. Cassidy nearly shed tears of joy.

"Ye'll call again, yer Honour?"

"I will that."

But Quinney kept away from the biggest blackguard in Ballybarahane for a day or two. An idea was fructifying in his mind. It grew with the rapidity of Jack's beanstalk. It burgeoned and bloomed.

CHAPTER III

SHELAGH SEES A CLOUD

§ 1

Upon the morning following his visit to the shebeen, Quinney asked his host and Miss Shelagh to take the air with him in the park. Out of sight of the house he said abruptly:

"Miss Shelagh has found a way."

"Shelagh?" exclaimed Kilrain.

"The only way."

Shelagh laughed.

"If I found it, in my sleep, maybe, 'tis lost it is."

"Londonderry," observed a stranger to Ulster, "is not too far off."

"We call it Derry."

"Derry it is, for ever and ever. If I get your best stuff to Derry it's really in London."

Quinney was pleased with this quip, which passed unnoticed.

He continued:

"It might be up at Christie's in six weeks."

"Christie's?"

"You own some pictures that should average three hundred apiece."

"As much as that?"

"If the right sort were on the bid. I'd make that my business. The plate, those old tankards and porringers, are worth just about their weight in gold sovereigns."

"You didn't know that, did you, Dion?" asked Shelagh, breathless with excitement.

"If everybody knew the real value of such things I should go out of business, Miss Shelagh. The glass——"

"Urquhart was keenest about that."

"Mr. Urquhart is right. Your glass is wonderful. Unfortunately, as your guest, I can't get anything to Derry."

Shelagh eyed him reproachfully.

"And ye said I'd found a way!"

"Yes. I must have a row with Sir Dion. I must be kicked out of Castle Kilrain. I must be accepted in the village as his enemy and a red-hot Republican."

"Mr. Dolan, ye quare man, go aisy."

"And then," said Quinney solemnly, "as an avowed enemy, and with the help of another enemy—for I can't wangle the thing alone—I must burgle Castle Kilrain in the interests of THE CAUSE."

Sir Dion burst out laughing:

"I could hug you for thinking of that. It's the only way—sure! When will you do it?"

"Never," said Shelagh. "Think of the risk to him. He doesn't know; we do."

"'Tis the dull life we lead here, Shelagh, that makes me think of the fun of it. To use *them* to save *us*."

"I'm sure," said Quinney, "that the risk is small. I can make Pat Cassidy believe that I'm a bigger blackguard than he is himself. At any rate, he and his friends must be convinced that Castle Kilrain has been burgled in the interests of the Republic. Later, they may think that Michael Dolan was a traitor."

"If you knew what they do to traitors. My father told me this. At the time of the Phœnix Park murders one man turned Queen's evidence and split upon his confederates. He was kept a prisoner in Dublin for nearly a year. Afterwards he was disguised and smuggled very carefully out of Ireland to South Africa. When he landed at Port Elizabeth he was shot dead."

"Serve him right," growled Quinney.

"I could tell you half a dozen more stories. Before the Treaty, the R.I.C., just a few men here and there, working at daily risk of their lives, amongst a hostile population, had to rely largely upon secret information furnished to them by loyalists who dared not openly admit their loyalty. They were intimidated by both parties, the Republican Army and the Free Staters. Sooner or later these unfortunate wretches were brutally murdered. The English Press, with one exception, never published the outrages committed on us. They did print what was done in reprisal to the Shinners."

"Never did hold with reprisals, Miss Shelagh."

"Perhaps not. But what else could a handful of men do, unsupported by the British Government? Do you suggest that they were to be wiped out by savages without lifting a hand?"

"N-n-no."

"Well, to-day, just shooting or hanging doesn't glut their thirst for cruelty. Not fifteen miles from where we stand a 'traitor' was burnt to death—slowly."

"Very narsty ending," admitted Quinney. "But, cheer up, Miss Shelagh. An old gipsy once told

me that I should bow my knee to my sovereign before I turned up my toes. 'Rise, Sir Joseph Quinney!' Lordy! it would tickle Mrs. Quinney pink. Someway, King George hasn't sent for me yet."

Kilrain laughed too loudly to please Miss Bourke. He did not improve matters when he added gaily:

"And what price the fun of this?"

"The fun of it!"

The pupils of a pair of blue eyes dilated till they became menacingly black.

"Fun! Is it fun and nothing else ye think of, Dion Kilrain?"

She laughed scornfully.

And then, as unexpectedly, with that strange catch in her soft voice which never failed to move Quinney, she turned to him.

"Fun has broken many an Irishman's back and many an Irishwoman's heart."

Quinney looked disconcerted. Kilrain indiscreetly attempted to soothe a much ruffled young lady. They had sat down on a bench (sadly in need of repair), placed upon a sort of tumulus by Kilrain's mother. No eavesdropper could approach the small mound undetected. Shelagh was between the men. Kilrain laid a too caressing hand upon a rounded forearm. The hand was shaken off; the owner of the forearm sprang to her feet, angrily confronting two fun-seekers. There was no disarming catch in her voice; she spoke clearly and crisply:

"Is there no sense left in the men of Ireland? Are you just children playing with fire? Haven't we had fires enough? Well, you needn't count me in as a party to such ridiculous schemes. I have

no faith in them, and," she annihilated Kilrain with her last words, "*very little faith in you.*"

She walked swiftly away without looking back.

"Mustn't play with that fire," murmured Quinney.

Kilrain, for the moment, remained tongue-tied. He stared at his own bare hills, as if seeking comfort from them. The scathing indictment of fun might well give him pause. He had found fun and grouse upon the heather, fun and salmon in the rivers. And now such fun was at an end. Would it ever return?

"Knock-out," he muttered to the sympathetic Quinney. The husband of Susan replied promptly:

"Lord love us! The best of 'em are built that way. When they say what they mean, they don't mean all they say."

"It was her idea, you said, not yours?"

"I did. Of course, she was joking. Likes her bit of fun as much as any of us. And, by gum! she hit by chance the right nail on the head, the only nail. No harm in talking possibilities over, hay?"

Kilrain nodded. He was thinking of Shelagh's Parthian shaft still quivering in a sensitive heart. Nevertheless, the tones of Quinney's voice were cheering and cheerful. It is likely that, up to this point, Sir Dion had regarded the burgling suggestion as a joke not to be taken too seriously. In less than five minutes Quinney, so he discovered, meant business. The dealer's plans were cut and dried.

He submitted them in tabloid form.

Pat Cassidy had been chosen as his brother burglar. Kilrain approved the choice.

"If you can grease his dirty palm sufficiently,

he might stand in. Pat is loyal to none save himself. Pat has horses and a van."

Quinney knew this and was counting on it.

"We find the front door open, as it generally is."

Kilrain had an excuse for such carelessness.

"What's the use of bars and chains when they can help themselves to anything I have, when and where they like?"

"You wouldn't disturb us if—if Pat sneezed?"

"Not if he coughed his soul up."

"In two hours we should have the best stuff in the van. Pat will drive it as near the border as he dares go. Perhaps I could persuade him to drive across it."

"Never. He's an arrant coward. More, you couldn't be travelling at night in Ulster. There's the curfew. The R.U.C. have instructions to fire upon anybody moving after eleven p.m."

"Dear, dear!"

"Your plan is sound enough if you stop short of the frontier in Free State territory. And in Free State territory Cassidy can be trusted to deal with freebooters. But—here's the snag. You might strike a flying patrol of the Ulster Constabulary. What then?"

"I've thought of that, Sir Dion. We must sooner or later strike the Ulster police. You told me that every road leading into Ulster is blocked at the border."

"It is."

"I must have a bill of sale from you *to Michael Dolan*, signed by you. The R.U.C. will escort your things to Derry."

"Mighty fine, Misther Dolan. But—if you show

that bill of sale before Cassidy he'll know you for a traitor."

Quinney said calmly:

"He's the first person to whom I shall show it."

"What?"

"I shall show it to him as a forgery executed by me."

Kilrain gazed at Quinney affectionately.

"You must have Irish blood in your veins."

"Not a drop."

"Well, well, lyin's in the air of Donegal. Urquhart said you were the boy for this job. Ye are."

"That bill of sale was my thought," said Quinney proudly. "Accepted as genuine by the police, it will secure their help; accepted as a fake by Cassidy, it will secure his."

Sir Dion groaned.

"And I'm to be out of this, the roaring joke, with mighty little risk, so far as I see."

"I shall sweeten Cassidy's confidence by a promise of fifty pounds, when he dumps me and your things on the road. He and his van will be back in Ballybarahane before dawn. If he accepts me as a patriot, well and good. If he thinks me as big a blackguard as himself, he has earned fifty pounds for an easy night's work."

"Damn it!" exclaimed Kilrain. "I don't see one flaw. When Pat Cassidy takes leave of you, and gladly he'll do it, Mr. Dolan and my things vanish automatically."

"Yes," said Quinney.

"There's the bare chance that Pat, after I've kicked you out of Castle Kilrain, may get the wind up."

"That chance we must risk, Sir Dion. He won't suffer from wind when I shake my American dollars in his ugly mug."

"He will when he finds himself near a Lancia armoured car with its Lewis gun at full cock. Look out then!"

§ 2

Kilrain—as soon as he returned to the house—was eager to make peace with Shelagh, but she kept her head turned from him, ministering to her father, sitting by him in the saloon after tea, and stroking his hair. Perhaps a woman is never so beguiling (or so exasperating) as when she lavishes caresses upon a father or brother in the presence of a lover.

"None for me," thought Sir Dion.

Mr. Michael Dolan was absent from this family circle. He deemed it politic to talk with Mrs. Sweeny, and scatter more sweeties, as largess, amongst the shock-headed brats of Ballybarahane.

A man of sanguine temperament hoped that Mr. Bourke would doze off under the magical touch of a tender hand.

He did.

An unhappy swain glanced at the averted head.

"Shelagh——?"

"Shush-h-h!"

"I won't shush any longer."

"Ye can help Tim, poor boy! When a Donegal man neglects his horses the divil must be in him."

"Horses! Is my mind running on horses?"

"It ought to be."

"You well know whom I'm thinking of, night and day."

"Faith, and I do—yourself. 'Tis the way of men."

Kilrain muttered "Oh, hell!" under his breath. Shelagh heard him and made no sign.

"What have I done to deserve sour looks?"

"Am I looking at you, Dion Kilrain?"

"I'm looking at you, Miss Bourke."

"Ye might be worse employed, Sir Dion."

He jumped up from his chair, and approached as near as he dared. A reassuring snore escaped from Mr. Bourke.

"Give me five minutes, Shelagh, at the end of the saloon."

She hesitated and rose slowly. Kilrain followed her to a window overlooking Lough Swilly. Kilrain knew the lough in all its moods and tenses, better than he knew Shelagh.

To the left of Rathmullen he could see Cruiv Drim a Dhiaoul, the Devil's Backbone, and he was thinking that the devil had come back to Donegal. Shelagh, gazing at the lough, recalled some lines written by a Primate of Ireland:

Its face, whose violet melted,
Melted in roseate gold—
Roses and violets dying
Into a silver mystery
Of soft impalpable haze . . .

"Do you hate me, Shelagh?"

She shook her head, sighing.

"What have I done? Tell me."

"It's not what you've done, it's what I want you

to do that troubles me, Dion. If you value my—my friendship and—and respect—you will do it as soon as our brave friend returns to this house."

She spoke so quietly that he was misled.

"I'll do anything, anything, to please you."

She held up her hand.

"It's no small thing I'm asking."

"The bigger the better."

She looked at him pleadingly; all anger had died out of her face. "It's so big that I can see nothing else. It's a black cloud that is round me, the black cloud of fear. It hides you from me, and you alone can drive it away."

"Then it's gone, avourneen."

She remained silent. A sense of humour doesn't save every situation in peaceful Ireland. Her pulses had quickened at the thought of Quinney and some Shinner carrying five thousand pounds out of Donegal, but all the sorrowful knowledge that had been burned into her soul made her think of a friend alone at dead of night with an enemy.

She spoke in an attenuated whisper.

"It won't go, Dion, till HE goes. Tell him to go."

A young fellow too full still of the joy of life to consider death, said bitterly:

"It's little ye care, Shelagh, what this means to me, and it's too proud you are to think of what it may mean to you. Maybe I've been a fool. Clever I'm not and never pretended to be. If you wanted me as I want you, you'd lep, as I do, over your woman's fears."

"And if I tried to bribe you——?"

"Bribe me?"

Her soft brogue came back. Oh, the beguiling sweetness of it to Irish ears!

"I'll marry ye, Dion, I'll live with ye and work for ye here in Castle Kilrain, if only ye'll send back a good kind man to the wife who, maybe, is crying her eyes out for him in London."

The bribe was irresistible. And fear is contagious. Kilrain said hoarsely:

"If I do this thing, Shelagh, will you give me your lips here and now?"

"Ye can help yourself," she said with a gulp.

But as Kilrain opened his arms, as a blush deepened the damask on Shelagh's cheek, Mr. Dolan opened the door.

"Tell him now," she whispered.

"If you'll back me up."

She nodded.

The three passed quietly through the saloon and into Sir Dion's room, where he kept fishing tackle and sporting prints. Quinney chuckled, absorbed in his great scheme, but quite ready to profit by Shelagh's wits. He believed, poor fellow, that Kilrain had soothed her fears. He told himself that he had "butted in" at the moment when Jack and Jill were about to kiss and make friends.

He was soon undeceived. Kilrain beat no bushes, thinking of Shelagh's tantalizing lips. She had made him see the sword hanging by a hair above a friend's head.

"We must chuck it."

"Ho!"

Joe Quinney sat bolt upright in his chair, bristling

all over. Of course the young lady had had her way. He guessed that. A searching glance at her distressed face sufficed him. As instantly, the qualities that made him successful as a dealer, his "push" and "drive," his determination to come out "on top," asserted themselves. His mental muscles stiffened as Kilrain continued:

"I saw the fun of it, ye see. To diddle 'em—! To use that blackguard—! To have the laugh of 'em—! But you're my guest." Kilrain dropped his light tone and spoke with dignity. "God forgive me! I asked you here. And now I ask you to leave us. We shall manage somehow."

"I mean to leave you, Sir Dion; the sooner the better."

His tone was unmistakable.

"But *I* mean—well, you know what *I* mean."

"I've never backed out of a tight place yet. This *is* fun for me. And if—if I have to pay for my fun I'm ready to do it. I know how Miss Shelagh feels."

"Ye don't."

"I do. You both think that I haven't reckoned up the risk. I have. And I mean to go on; not back."

Susan had heard him speak like this, aggressively, sticking out his chin, squaring his shoulders, outbidding, so to speak, other bidders.

"Oh-h-h!" sighed Shelagh.

"I've reckoned up something else," went on Quinney angrily. "It beats me that you property owners over here don't hate us Englishmen. It fair mads me that we, *we* have put you in the cart, left you to stew in this dirty, seething pot."

"Tch!"

Quinney lowered his voice, but it became, perhaps, more intense.

"I never knew, I never guessed, till I came here, what England has not done. I was fed up with Ireland, sick of it! And our own troubles are big enough. Rates and taxes! Gosh! Enough to give any man fatty degeneration of the heart. Robs him of initiative, hay? Well, I came here, and I saw and heard. Seeing's believing. I'd like to cart some of our politicians into Donegal. *The best of 'em can't know.* Makes me feel like a lizard basking in the sun when an earthquake is going on. Anyway, one Englishman is going to help you, if he can. Suppose I slunk back to my wife and told her the truth, all of it, and then owned up that fear of my own hide had hounded me home without lifting a finger to help you two, why, damn it, she wouldn't live with me. I'm as dead set on doing my bit as an Englishman, as you are getting rid of me. *Get rid of me!* Fire me out of Castle Kilrain! I shall ask Cassidy for a bed in his filthy hotel to-morrow night."

"What did Urquhart tell me——?"

Shelagh jumped up, thrilled.

"Micky Dolan, blessed man, ye'll be eaten alive in the shebeen."

"Never travel without Keating," declared Joe Quinney.

The victory was won without firing another shot. A young man and a maid surrendered to personality. Each, looking at Quinney from different angles, recognized in him an invincible determination to "see the thing through." Immediately, it became

possible for these three to meet on common ground and to work for a most uncommon end.

But not in the saloon.

They agreed to call a council of war, next day, in the park, after breakfast. Quinney, glancing at the lovers out of the corner of a twinkling eye, withdrew on some excuse from the saloon. Mr. Bourke was placidly slumbering in his armchair. Kilrain, for the second time, held out eager arms. Shelagh smiled faintly, shaking her head.

"It's as we were, Dion. The big cloud has come back. Till it clears I don't, someway, see you clearly, and, faith, I don't see myself, dear."

She spoke so gently that resentment was discourteous. He turned his back on her.

"Dion——!"

"Yes?"

"Is he armed?"

"Armed? No. Just as well. He couldn't use an automatic if he had one."

"It looks to me as if he were running no risks."

He remained silent, frowning.

§ 3

Next morning, after some argument, it was decided by the three councillors that Mr. Bourke should not be warned that a comedy was to be played under his nose on the night following. In the event of trouble, the less he knew the better. If the house were burgled successfully none would protest more vigorously than he. Terence would report what he said. Ballybarahane would never suspect collusion.

Kilrain, fresh from an ordnance map, instructed Mr. Dolan topographically.

"Coast clear," said Quinney.

"If Pat falls for it," added Kilrain, who had been in New York himself.

Quinney thought he knew his Pat, as one ripe for any adventure with Irish-American gold behind it and little danger to his own person. Shelagh remained silent. The hope sustained her that Mr. Cassidy was too arrant a coward to take life. He would take everything else. Otherwise there was the grim possibility of Mr. Dolan being murdered and robbed. Pat might be conceited enough to think that alone and unaided he could dispose at his leisure of the loot.

§ 4

The comedy began in the middle of dinner, to the amazement of Mr. Bourke and Terence. Mr. Bourke knew that a London dealer, masquerading as an Irish-American, had boldly ventured into Donegal upon a fool's errand. Absorbed by his own unhappy affairs, a prematurely old man paid but scant attention to the stranger. And Quinney's brogue was rich enough to justify the conjecture that his mother might have been poor Irish. Two things amazed Mr. Bourke. Sir Dion began to talk politics before Terence; and his guest, a tradesman, dared to contradict him at his own table!

He could hardly believe his ears.

The effect on him reacted on Terence, as indeed Kilrain had foreseen. Terence, may God forgive him, thought that the young master had been drinking.

He said as much to his wife before the trout came in.

Unpaid rents provoked a hot discussion. Sir Dion opened the debate.

"My people would pay something if they weren't scared stiff."

Mr. Dolan replied aggressively:

"I made my money in business, and, maybe, I look at money from my angle."

"What angle?"

"I said *mine*, Sir Dion. Aren't we all lookin' out for Number One? Be honest now! Isn't it FORCE—call it the law, if ye like—that's back o' the tax collector in N'York? Could he collect a cint without it?"

Mr. Bourke coughed. Nobody noticed him, except Terence.

"Force? You—you defend brute force?"

"Not I, Sir Dion, but I die aisy when I have to."

"Force robs me of my rents."

"Thrue for you. The boot's on the other leg. I'm not saying it's a betther leg, may be it's bigger."

"Do you defend Bolshevism in Russia?"

"Well, well, I give Rooshia a miss."

"This is a question of principle, Mr. Dolan."

"But rents is intherest. If ye watch out for the intherest, the principle 'll take care of itself."

"Dion," said Mr. Bourke.

"Sir?"

"What is this claret we're drinking?"

"Muck, if you ask me," was the startling reply.

Mr. Bourke wondered if he had been snubbed.

Kilrain struck the table with his fist.

"This sort of talk takes away my appetite. But I'll have this out with you, Mr. Dolan, in the saloon after dinner."

And thus the ways were soaped for Mr. Dolan to slide easily from Castle Kilrain to Ballybarahane. Mr. Bourke went to bed even earlier than usual. Ten minutes after he had left the saloon, the bell pealed. Terence answered it to discover his master stamping furiously upon his hearthrug.

"Terence——"

"Your Honour—— ?"

"Ye'll help Mr. Dolan to pack his suit-case, and ye'll see to it that Tim drives him this night to Ballybarahane."

"I can pack my own suit-case," shouted Mr. Dolan, pushing rudely past Terence, who was staring, dismayed, at Sir Dion. Shelagh sat in a chair, quite impassive.

"No Republican shall eat my bread and drink my wine," declared Kilrain fiercely. He glared so savagely at his old retainer that Terence hurried from the saloon, panic-stricken. If Sir Dion turned him and his out of the Castle where would they find food and shelter ?

§ 5

Within half an hour, Tim, the out-at-elbows groom, drove Mr. Dolan to Cassidy's "Hotel," Pat found a bedroom for a "bootlegger" apparently speechless with rage and indignation. Tim whetted his whistle at the bar, and told all that he knew, not much.

"'Tis politics, boys. Ould Tirince says 'twas

a foine disputation. Misther Dolan is a nice man. Wan more, Misthress Cassidy, and I'll be off."

Next morning, what was left uneaten of an Irish-American whisky potentate demanded a time-table and eggs and bacon. Pat Cassidy, scoffing at time-tables, brought some sizzling rashers from "me own pig." Overnight, he had gleaned nothing from a guest too angry to talk even to a sympathetic listener. Pat noticed that Dolan was calmer. He greeted him with exuberance :

" Praise God ! but this is a grand encounter."

" Sit down, Cassidy."

Authority informed Mr. Dolan's tones. Pat sat down.

" I've never been kicked out of anny man's house before."

" Holy fly ! Did he kick yez ? "

" And for why ? Because me, an American citizen, have me notions about the dear counthry that gave me birth."

" Glory be ! And, see here, yer Honour, there's worse places than Ballybarahane for an honest man. Sir Dion may repint a dirthy bit o' work. We've left him and his by their lone, but it beats me what the likes of you was doing up there."

" And what," demanded Mr. Dolan derisively, " are the likes of you doing down here ? "

Pat Cassidy betrayed uneasiness. He was aware that he had not done, perhaps, all that was expected of him by certain persons in high authority of whose names he was ignorant. Was Mr. Dolan on a mission ?

" Ye're a patriot, Pat, and so am I. Shall we

leave it at that? Ye can ask Tammany who I am."

Pat was immensely impressed. Somehow Tammany and Napper Tandy were linked together in his mind. He couldn't have given a logical reason why this was so. He had certainly heard of Tammany. The word "graft" was not unfamiliar to him.

"In N'York, Pat, a man in me posish deals with big men. I came over to deal, if I could, with Sir Dion Kilrain. Strings were pulled to get me into his house. Don't ask me questions. I'm not at liberty to say more."

"But I am, yer Honour. Spake the word, sor, an' there'll be a bonfire blazin' on the hill this very night."

"Cassidy," replied Dolan sternly, "every house burnt in Ireland keeps good dollars out of Ireland."

Pat scratched his red head; he had heard something like this before. There was a significant pause.

"Ye need money here?"

"Ay, an' that's the way it is."

"See now, Cassidy, it's up to me, but not out o' revenge, me man, to put you wise. But—no—no."

"Holy Mother! why d'ye say—no?"

Mr. Dolan sighed.

"N'York methods are too up-to-date for County Donegal."

Cassidy glanced furtively about him.

"Mr. Dolan, if it wouldn't be troublin' ye, spake out what's in yer mind. Up-to-date, ye say. May be not. We're in the counthry of the O'Neills and O'Donnells—Heaven rest their sowls! And anything ye say is betune me and your Honour."

"Ye swear that?"

"By Saint Columba himself!"

"You damned fool——!"

So vigorously did Mr. Dolan speak that an honest son of the soil retreated, apprehending physical violence.

"There's a gold mine up on the hill, and ye don't know it."

"Och! Think o' that. A gold mine is it?"

Mr. Dolan lowered his voice.

"Things that are worth their weight in gold in N'York."

"Ye mane ould mugs an' the like. An' we'd be afther 'em too, but what can we do wid pictures an' silver?"

Mr. Dolan held securely two shifty eyes.

"You can do—*nothing*, but I—I can sell them. If a man can sell whisky to-day in N'York, he can sell annything."

"I belave ye."

Mr. Dolan rose. He had trifled long enough with unappetizing rashers. He spoke with portentous gravity.

"If ye care, Pat Cassidy, to continue this conversation, I suggest that we go for a walk together."

"I'm yer man, Mr. Dolan."

§ 6

Pat Cassidy, no doubt, had the makings of a thief in him before he was born, but a burglar is somewhat bigger than any thief. He must possess courage. Pat's courage, such as it was, served him with horses

and women. He could bully both. It evaporated when he found himself within measurable distance of the R.U.C.

Pat licked his thin lips when Mr. Dolan spoke of the loot to be taken so easily from Castle Kilrain. Confidence was indeed sweetened when a bonus of fifty pounds was mentioned. But satisfactory negotiations came to a deadlock as the amateur burglars approached, in fancy, the terrible frontier.

"If we met a raiding pathrol——! Misther Dolan, dear, thim divils shoot first and ax questions afther. I'm wid ye in this. See now, we'll drive the ould van through the park, where the palings is down, an' we'll hilp ourselves, an' thin, begor, we'll hide the stuff in a snug place I know. Ye can thrust an honest man."

Mr. Dolan rebuked him sternly.

"I can sell this stuff, you can't. See now, am I to be kickin' my heels waiting on *you*? No, not by a dam sight. Time is big money to me. And where d'ye think I'm taking the stuff at the risk of me own neck?"

"Tell me."

"To Derry."

"God presarve us! To Derry?"

"From Derry I can ship it to N'York."

"Is that the way of it? But, holy fly, how in Hell will ye get it to Derry?"

Mr. Dolan played lightly his ace of trumps. From his pocket he took leisurely a sheet of foolscap, the bill of sale.

"D'ye know Sir Dion's fist when ye see it?"

"That I do."

"Then—look."

Pat looked, and forthwith burst into unprintable language.

"I drew it up meself."

This was true.

"But if ye're fool enough to belave that Sir Dion signed it, I'm done with ye."

"Mr. Dolan, yer Honour's too much for me. An' thim divils know his fist right well. I lift me cap to ye. I'm wid ye to the edge o' Hell an' no farther."

"I ask no more, Pat. Ye'll drop me and the stuff as near Ulster as we dare, and it's back home ye'll be, before dawn, with fifty pounds in yer pocket, well-earned money. Ye'll hear from me later, and them as pulls strings in N'York 'll speak well of Patrick Cassidy."

"Will ye make it guineas, Mr. Dolan?"

"I will not."

§ 7

That same night, when Ballybarahane was fast asleep and no lights twinkled in the cabins, Pat put two big horses to his van. He was confident that no villager, if he happened to be abroad, would ask questions of him. In the Irish Free State it isn't wise to ask questions. The burglars, however, encountered no foot passengers. They drove quietly out of the village and into the park, approaching the house across soft turf. Cassidy provided two masks, and Quinney noticed that they exhibited signs of use. A moon, nearing the full, had been up about two hours.

Kilrain, in a dark room, peeping out from behind

a thick curtain, saw the van approach and chuckled. Shelagh was with him, but not in a melting or chuckling mood.

The burglars could enter the house by door or window. They tried the door first. It had been left unlocked.

From Mr. Bourke's room came the sound of snoring. Kilrain had mixed a strong toddy for his guest.

No sound from the reception-rooms floated upstairs.

"Pat is sober," whispered Kilrain.

The actual burgling was so simple that two gossoons might have done it without fear of detection. The silver was collected from dining-room and pantry. Ten pictures were taken from their heavy frames. The finest specimens of glass were tenderly wrapped up by Quinney in newspapers, window curtains, and table linen. Terence, his wife and Moyna slept in the distant wing that had held in pre-war days a dozen men and maids. Quinney mentioned to Pat the possibility that Terence, perhaps a light sleeper, might interrupt their labours. Pat's reply confirmed what Sir Dion had said about spies.

"Yer Honour can rest aisy. Patrick Cassidy, begor, is ould Terence's masther."

In less than two hours the loot was snugly packed in the van. Shortly after two a.m., Pat's horses were on the road to Derry.

"Softly now over the stones and holes," counselled an anxious dealer.

The moon shone brilliantly upon a wild landscape. By day the nakedness of the land revealed itself. By night mountains and hills assumed a magical beauty. The roughness of the road alone aroused

Quinney's apprehensions. He held in his arms, caressingly, a banqueting *tazze* of Early Munster, finer than any specimen in the Angus Urquhart collection. Had Pat been deaf Quinney would have crooned over it.

Two more hours passed without any disturbing incident. And then, at the top of a steep hill, stopping to ease his horses, Pat touched his fellow-burglar's arm.

"Whisht! Did ye hear annything?"

"No."

"Maybe I was mistaken. An' there's loose horses on all the roads."

Quinney pricked up sharp ears, as Cassidy said significantly:

"It's not horses that bother me. If we heard the buzz now of a hornet——"

He was alluding to Crossley tenders.

They sped down hill again. Quinney thought to himself:

"Too easy!"

Unfortunately, an Englishman had not taken into full consideration the capacity for suspicion inherent in the Celtic mind. And many a promising adventure has been changed into misadventure because things have gone too smoothly at first. When Quinney found himself close to the frontier he thought exultantly:

"Kissing Susan soon."

Mr. Cassidy's thoughts were more complex. He was wondering whether a man successful in the illicit whisky trade was really inspired by patriotic motives? Would he ever hear from Mr. Dolan, of New York,

after leaving him with the loot near the border? Cassidy had profound misgivings on this point, being in the habit of judging others by the standard he set for himself. As they approached Ulster he grew more and more nervous. The frontier was peppered with constabulary platoons going out night and day. Crossley tenders, filled with special constabulary, armed with Service rifles, bayonets, and Mills hand grenades, scoured the road. They never went out or came back by the same route. And these horrible tenders often crossed the frontier, seeking to murder quiet, inoffensive, God-fearing sons of Mother Church —exactly like himself!

Meantime, Mr. Dolan laughed and told stories to beguile the tedium of the journey. His spirits were rising.

Cassidy pulled up his steaming horses.

"Anything wrong?"

"Mine are big horses. 'Tis aisy enough to break the wind of a big horse. An' we're near where we want to be. Thim polis raid up to the river yonder. Will ye be minded to stretch a leg, your Honour? An' I'll be lookin' for some likely place now, behind a wall maybe, where we can lave the things."

The unsuspecting Quinney got down.

"A dhrop of whisky 'll do us no harm."

Mr. Dolan refused to drink. Pat swallowed enough strong poteen for three. Thus fortified, he addressed his fellow-burglar in firm tones:

"Will it be throublin' your Honour if I ax for the fifty pounds?"

Mr. Dolan hesitated for a fraction of a second, long enough to deepen suspicion. He was wondering

whether Pat had taken him within touch of the R.U.C.

"If ye want it now, ye can have it."

In the bright moonlight a fat note-case engaged Mr. Cassidy's undivided attention. With seeming carelessness Mr. Dolan took from it ten crisp "fivers" and tendered them to a son of Donegal, impulsive as he was impecunious. He pouched them swiftly. Mr. Dolan sauntered down the road, looking for the river. Kilrain had mentioned a river.

A minute later, Quinney, not Dolan, hear an ominous click behind him. He turned sharply to behold Mr. Cassidy with a Hun automatic in his hand. Pat was grinning, inasmuch as he had reason to believe himself master of the situation:

"This is the way of it, your Honour, I'd like a word with ye."

Quinney appeared outwardly cool.

"Put up that gun first."

"Ah, now, it's cocked an' ready for any murdherin' Special."

Quinney—how Susan would have admired him! —laughed.

"Don't be a fool, Pat. I'm unarmed. Run your hands over me."

He had kept his head and lost his brogue. Possibly Mr. Cassidy was too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice this lamentable lapse. He accepted a thoughtful invitation, satisfied himself that his companion was telling the truth, and put away his "gun."

But he wanted a "word" and more.

"I'm minded to tell ye who I am. I'm the Centre of the Ballybarahane Circle. If ye know annything

at all, at all, ye know that the Circle started in New York."

"I know more than you'll ever know."

"Maybe. Give me the word an' the sign."

"To Hell with words and signs, Pat Cassidy. My Circle is a damned sight bigger than yours."

Cassidy was impressed. Quinney went on:

"You have two hundred and fifty dollars of mine. Dollars talk louder than signs."

"Faith! And they do that. Come now, hand over fifty more pounds, and I'll lave ye wid all we've got in the ould van. I mane ye can have the lot."

Again Quinney hesitated.

"Pat, you don't trust me. And you're thinking of your own skin."

"Maybe I am. We don't thrust our own brothers in Donegal."

"You would be content with a paltry hundred pounds for your share in this foine night's work?"

"I would, indade. Hand it over, Mr. Dolan."

"All right, put the stuff by the road."

Pat laughed. He was now certain that Mr. Dolan was a sharper rogue than himself, and as little of a patriot. Oddly enough, in Pat's eyes, a clever burglar ranked higher than a dealer in illicit whisky.

"Shtand where ye are. Shmoke a poipe."

"I think I will," said Mr. Dolan.

He lit a cigar. Pat mounted the box and began to turn the horses.

"What are you doing?"

"Gittin' the tail o' the van forninst the wall, Mr. Dolan."

This sounded reasonable, but, one minute later, Pat Cassidy with a triumphant yell whipped up his steeds and disappeared round a bend in the road.

Quinney was left alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER IV

SHELAGH EXPLAINS

§ 1

PERHAPS, during a long and not uneventful life, he had never felt so cheap, so disconcerted. He muttered to himself:

"Humpty-Dumpty!"

He hurled a good cigar upon the road and trampled it under foot.

"Never can face Susie after this."

The prospect of facing Sir Dion and Shelagh was even less inviting. He went on muttering:

"Cross frontiers——! Not fit to cross Piccadilly without a nurse."

The moon, as if incapable of suffering fools gladly, hid herself behind a cloud. Darkness brooded over Donegal and Joe Quinney.

"Must *do* something."

But he was quite beyond coherent thought, and utterly lost geographically. Pat had made a star-spangled ass out of Michael Dolan.

He girded up his loins and pursued the van.

He hurled his overcoat from him, running on and

up. The moon, too interested to hide herself any longer, peeped out. After turning the corner, Quinney saw the road stretching straight in front of him, white and dusty. Some three hundred yards away, on the crest of the steep hill, black against a silver sky, was silhouetted the van.

Quinney stood still, gasping.

The van was not moving.

He recalled the automatic.

"Boiled, braised, cooked to a crisp," he reflected.

A shot rang sharply out. Another answered it, or was it an echo?

And then—silence.

Quinney scurried on, puffing like a grampus.

Suddenly, he halted. A horseman was galloping straight at him. Quinney scrambled over a broken-down stone wall and fled. Donegal seemed to be bristling with desperadoes. As he legged it across a stony field, he glanced over his shoulder. The horseman had leapt the wall.

"I must die like a man," thought Quinney.

He heard a voice as if from Heaven.

"It's all right, old sport. Are you hurt?"

Sir Dion was speaking.

"I'm not quite dead," gasped Quinney.

"Then hurry back with me. You must drive that van to Derry."

"Never."

"Or ride my horse."

"Not for what's in the van. Where's Cassidy?"

"He's *in* the van with a bullet through his shoulder. Shelagh is giving him first aid."

"Give him another dose of lead," muttered Quinney.

Kilrain had time to explain Miss Bourke's presence (and his own) before Quinney and he reached the van.

"I'd made up my mind to follow you in case of trouble. You can thank Shelagh for that."

"I will," said Quinney.

"And faith, she, the darlin', made up her mind to follow me. I saddled old Crusader; and she saddled Cruiskeen before I was out of sight. And this is the best part of it. The mare overhauled me before we'd gone five miles. Twig?"

"I don't."

"Would she, Shelagh I mean, have overtaken me unless she wanted my company?"

"Perhaps not," murmured a dealer in antiques, not at his best.

"And so we rode on together with the Man in the Moon winking at us, and a breeze from Lough Swilly kissing our cheeks. 'Twas all the kissing done. And, Micky Dolan, if I get ye safe to Derry, she's mine for ever and ever, Amen."

"And if I *do* get safe to Derry," said Quinney quickly, "I'll come over to her wedding even if it takes place at Castle Kilrain."

"It won't. Tch!"

From the van, now not forty yards distant, came groans.

"Pat—scared stiff, not hurt," said Sir Dion contemptuously. "And in full possession of his wits. Remember—you're my prisoner, Micky Dolan, the burglar. Play up, Micky!"

He raised his whip, menacingly. Mr. Dolan marched in front of his captor till he reached the van.

"Shelagh," shouted Sir Dion, "I've got the other rascal. It's Mr. Dolan."

"Mr. Dolan? Why didn't ye shoot him, Dion dear?"

"Faith, because he's eaten my bread and drunk my wine. Into the van with ye, Mr. Dolan, and be lively now."

Mr. Dolan obeyed. He saw Pat propped up against a picture, a much changed and chastened Pat.

"The Blessed Saints presarve us!" whined Mr. Cassidy. "Is that Mr. Dolan?"

Quinney dissembled. Perhaps a sense of humour urged him to deal tenderly with a fellow-burglar.

"It's me," he replied gruffly.

"Mother o' God, the bad luck of it. When I turned me ould horses' heads they bolted on me."

"No place like home," murmured Quinney.

Sir Dion and Shelagh were with their horses. Pat, as a liar, surpassed himself.

"Glory be! Ye might have been shot to flinders like me, Mr. Dolan. 'Twas in me moind as the bullet shtruck me. Better me than him, I says."

"I tried to escape, Pat."

"Whish-h-ht now! The Speshuls haven't got us yit." He saw Sir Dion approaching and at once wailed out:

"Sir Dion, sor-r-r, 'twas a joke. Have I ever harmed anyone in me loife? Have I now?"

"You know best," said Kilrain cheerfully.

"And ye'll be afther taking your things back to Castle Kilrain, won't you now?"

"What! When we are so close to the frontier?"

"And me bleedin' to death. Sir Dion, a dyin' man asks yer Honour to take him to Father Flynn."

"There are priests in Derry, Pat. But, cheer up, we won't reach Derry, my man. The Ulster police, maybe, will have a word about that."

Cassidy dropped his whine for an instant.

"And w-what," he asked sourly, "have the Ulster polis to do wid a Free Stater?"

"Thrue for you," replied Sir Dion pleasantly. "The R.U.C., as you say, Pat, have no concern with burglary in Ballybarahane, and there's no extradition treaty to worry ye. But they're kindly souls, the dear boys. They'll take ye to hospital, unless——"

"Unless, yer Honour——?"

"Unless they recognize in you, Pat Cassidy, a bold man who has led, maybe, a raiding party across the frontier."

"Yer Honour loves a joke."

"Not as much as you do. If, I repeat, if they should spot you as one of those brave fellows who fired across the frontier into Ulster farms, why, then, 'twould be twenty strokes with the cat and three years' penal servitude."

Mr. Cassidy, for the first time in many years, remained speechless. Sir Dion continued in the same easy tone:

"Mr. Dolan here is an American citizen. We can deal with him."

"He tempted me, yer Honour; he did indade. If ye'll let me go, if ye'll turn me loose here an' now, I'll make a clane breast of it, I will."

"Thraitor!" hissed Mr. Dolan, in the best Bowery style.

By this time Shelagh was ready to advance with the led horse.

"Pat Cassidy," said Sir Dion to the young lady, "is ready to turn informer against Mr. Dolan, *if I let him go.*"

Pat wailed out:

"Ye'll say the good word for me, Miss Shelagh. Haven't I kept the boys away from Castle Kilrain? Is it much that I'm afther askin'? To crawl back to Father Flynn an' die? And him, the guest in yer house, who made a dirthy sinner out of a clane man," he pointed a not too clean finger at Mr. Dolan, "don't ye want to know more about *him*?"

"We do," said Shelagh gravely, but her eyes were twinkling. Perhaps she was thinking of Castle Kilrain at the mercy of the "boys." If Pat returned to Ballybarahane, nobody would know the true part played by Mr. Dolan.

Sir Dion, watching her intently, said sharply:

"Pat is your prisoner. Do what you like with him. Mr. Dolan is mine. I'll settle in full with him."

Shelagh nodded.

"Tell us all that you know about this man Dolan, and we'll let you go, Pat. But, mind you, we're still in County Donegal and Sir Dion used to be a magistrate. If he fines ye, what then?"

"Shure now, I'll pay the fine."

"Sir Dion fines you the loan of your van and horses. Explain the borrowing of 'em to the boys as best ye can."

"Begor! I'll do that, Miss Shelagh."

"To save your own skin," interpolated Sir Dion.

"Aisy now," murmured Shelagh. "Speak up, Pat."

Thus adjured, Mr. Cassidy made no inconsiderable effort. He denounced Mr. Dolan venomously as a corrupter of hard-working, honest men, as a stirrer-up of strife. Castle Kilrain had been burgled so that American dollars might support the Republican cause. When he finished, Mr. Dolan, using the Irish-American accent with telling effect on Pat, said loftily:

"I'm a true patriot, Pat Cassidy, and ye're a low-down cur. But my arm is long and strong, and ye'll be burning in Hell fire before this year is out." Then he turned to Kilrain.

"Fifty good pounds he had of me, Sir Dion. In return for yer bread and wine, I offer them to—you."

"Faith! And I'll accept them."

The notes were extracted from Pat's pocket, and a minute later he might have been seen moving swiftly, for a dying man, in the direction of Ballybarahane.

§ 2

Sir Dion laughed as he laughed when the fat pig took possession of his saloon.

"Ye've put the fear o' the Lord into him," Joe Quinney. If Pat doesn't shrivel in Hell he'll sizzle in Ballybarahane, thinking of an arm longer than his. And now, we'll be pushing on. I'll drive, and Shelagh will lead Crusader."

"Where are we?" asked Quinney, happy to find that the wonderful *tazze* was intact.

"Not so near safety as I'd like to be."

They began to descend the hill into a gorge. Half a mile farther on, Quinney could hear the roar of falling water, and shortly afterwards an imprecation from Sir Dion. Peering ahead, it seemed to him that the road ended on the edge of the river.

"Bridge blown up," said Kilrain.

Shelagh was behind with the saddle horses.

All three started at a river rushing eagerly to the Atlantic, tumbling over huge boulders, foam-flecked, impassable.

"By God! We're done, unless I can find a ford."

He mounted his horse. To the left a meadow sloped sharply to the river. Kilrain put his horse at the wall, topped it, and landed with a peck.

"Good lep," said Shelagh critically. "He'll find a ford. How did they cross rivers when there were no bridges? Can ye swim, Micky?"

"Not a yard, Miss Shelagh."

She looked coolly about her.

"Maybe there's a cabin somewhere. That bit o' meadow has been under cultivation. Is there a gate now? There is. What a boy it is! He leps first and looks for gates afther. Hold me mare, Micky."

Presently, Shelagh came back. She had discovered an almost obliterated track, which must lead somewhere, possibly to an old ford.

"We're as safe here as anywhere," she observed with true Irish philosophy.

To Quinney's astonishment, she began to prattle (his word) about good land, and precious little of it,

going out of cultivation. She talked as if she knew her subject, which she did. A dealer in antiques beheld, still dimly, a daughter of Donegal from a fresh angle. Astonishment yielded to admiration.

"Clever as they make 'em, you are." Then, following thought a step too far, he added reflectively: "Just as well."

She cooed at him:

"Tell me, Micky, what you mean by your 'just as well'?"

Alas! Quinney—for Mr. Dolan had ceased to be—had no lie ready.

Shelagh, with a tinkle of laughter, shook a slim finger at him.

"See now, Mr. Quinney, ye're English, and ye'll never quite understand us and our aisy ways. I'm laughing this minute, when an English girl might be crying. 'Tis all that's left to us," she sighed. "So ye think that it's just as well I look for gates instead of lepping stone walls. And ye're in the right of it, too. But with us," she drew herself up, "it's the men who lep walls that win our hearts. Ye won mine, Mr. Quinney, when ye came to Donegal to help Dion and me. If he isn't too clever, he knows enough to coax and tickle the wits of others, so, in the end, it's well served we women are. I've small use for the boy that looks for gaps and gates. I can do that."

As she spoke Kilrain came cantering up.

"Shall I test him?" asked Shelagh.

Without waiting for a reply, she called clearly to the horseman.

"There's a gate, Dion."

Kilrain put Crusader at the wall, an awkward leap up-hill. The gallant beast changed his feet on the loose stones and landed faultlessly.

"Ye heard me, Dion?"

"I did, Shelagh. But he pecked last time."

Quinney marked the glance she bestowed upon him, and doubt as to her real feelings for Sir Dion dissolved instantly.

He had found the ford.

They crossed with difficulty, and there was a sound of breaking glass. Quinney groaned, like a Baptist at a revival.

"Are you hurt?" asked Kilrain.

"Some of the glass is smashed."

"Glory be! I thought, my dear man, that you were in a fit."

"Nearly am," muttered Quinney.

A few miles more, and they reached the frontier. A police post, at a bridge-head, furnished an escort to the head-quarters of a platoon, where one of the District Inspectors gaily greeted Kilrain as an old schoolfellow.

At long last they saw the spire of Derry Cathedral.

§ 3

The Art world knows what the Kilrain "stuff" fetched at Christie's. The right people were bidding, and Urquhart secured the glass, but not the *tazze*. The curious may see that any day in Quinney's sanctuary. He refused the commission which was his due, and an Irishman, too courteous to press his point, understood and appreciated that refusal.

"I did it," declared Joe, "for the fun of the thing."

"You did it for Shelagh."

"Tch! I can't tell Susan that."

But Susan, you may be sure, wanted to know what her Joe did get in return for risking his life. She pressed home her point.

"Susie, I came out of it with empty hands."

"I can't believe it."

"Suppose, old dear, I wanted to convert you."

"Convert *me*? What an idea!"

"You've thrown it up to me, for nearly thirty years, that I'm after *things*. So I am. So I shall be till you take me, without a return ticket, to beautiful Brookwood. But this time, by gum, I was after *persons*. And it would take all the gilt off the gingerbread if I took one farthing from them. Now you have it."

Susan looked as if she hardly knew what to do with it, but she kissed Joe and smiled at him tenderly.

He got that.

After Kilrain's wedding in London, before he and his bride settled down in Cavan, Quinney said something to Susan which aroused in her mind dismal apprehensions that a too active brain might be softening. Without relevance, as they were sitting together after supper, the father of Posy (now a mother of five) made a confounding suggestion—

"Susie!"

"Yes, dear?"

"If—*if* we had another nice fat baby girl——"

"Bless my stars! My name is Susan not Sarah."

"I said 'if'——"

"The man is wrong in the head——! You used to tell me that you suffered quite enough with our first."

"So I did. But, if we *did* have another——!"

"Well?"

"I should like to call her—Shelagh."